

Advice from Beyond Blue for Staff

Looking after yourself after a disaster

People may be at risk of developing anxiety or depression after experiencing a traumatic event or a natural disaster like a bushfire, flood, cyclone or earthquake.

Communities and individuals affected by a disaster can experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that can be intense, confusing and frightening. These are common reactions to an extraordinary situation. Fear, for example, is an important and normal reaction that helps activate our body and mind to make decisions to protect our own life and the lives of loved ones, friends and neighbours. It is also normal for the memory of intense fear to stay with us.

Following a traumatic event or disaster, many people deal with memories and ongoing feelings by drawing on their own strengths, as well as the support of others, and will gradually rebuild their lives and achieve a sense of wellbeing again.

However, it is common that some people struggle to deal with feelings and thoughts that may follow such an event. It's important to know the difference between a common reaction to a stressful or traumatic event and signs that indicate you should seek additional support.

Common reactions

These reactions can be severe and are at their worst in the first week after the event, however, in most cases, they fade over a month. If a person's day-to-day functioning is seriously affected for more than one month after the event, it's important to discuss it with a GP or mental health professional. These reactions include:

- feeling overwhelmed
- feeling numb and detached
- inability to focus
- inability to plan ahead
- constant tearfulness
- intrusive memories or bad dreams related to the event
- sleep disturbances
- constant questioning – "What if I had done x, y or z, instead?"
- 'replaying' the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again.

It is also important to understand that a friend, loved one or work colleague may see these reactions in you, often when you do not. They may see you are detached, unfocused, anxious, or tearful without provocation. Listen to the opinions of people that you trust. It is a sign of respect to friends and family to act on their advice and discuss these issues with a GP or mental health professional.

Beyond a common reaction

If you experience any of these symptoms at any time, seek help from a GP or mental health professional:

- a sense that your emotional and/or physical reactions are not normal

- thoughts of self-harm or of ending your life
- loss of hope or interest in the future
- avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where you're unable to carry out day-to-day tasks
- frequently being easily startled e.g. jumping when a door slams, and then taking a long time to calm down
- feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- panic attack symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet
- excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said and done.

Dealing with the emotional impact of a disaster:

- spend time with people who care
- give yourself time
- find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect
- try to keep a routine going e.g. eating, sleeping, work, study routines
- return to normal activities
- talk about how you feel about what happened when you are ready
- do things that help you relax
- set realistic goals that keep you motivated, but don't take on too much (most people in this situation talk of recovery as a journey not a sprint)
- review and reward progress – notice even the small steps
- be prepared for times when you feel you are making no progress, everyone experiences this
- talk about the ups and downs of recovery with friends, family and the health professionals involved in your care
- have a plan to maintain positive changes and plans to deal with times of stress or reminders of the trauma.