

After a distressing event has happened

Information for communities, parents & caregivers

Australian Red Cross stands with all communities in the face of tragedy and distress. In our decades of supporting communities to recover or cope with distress, we are strongly aware of the impact disasters have on friends, families and communities. People and especially children can feel more vulnerable, worried or scared as a result of these events. This information might help.¹

Is this a common reaction?

It is common to feel upset. It's important to talk to people you trust about how you are feeling, and take extra care of yourself. Acknowledge that you have been through a highly stressful event, and notice how you are feeling. Try and get good sleep and rest, eat good food and try to make time for things that make you feel safe.

Being impacted by distressing events can impact our bodies, our brains and our relationships. While some people experience a range of reactions, it's important to remember that most people recover well from distressing events over time with support from their family, friends and community.

Some of the physical impacts of stress that you may experience can include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Muscle tension
- Exacerbation of pre-existing conditions (such as arthritis or asthma)
- Headaches and nausea
- Feeling restless
- Finding it hard to concentrate or problem solve
- Feeling a wide range of emotions, like anger, sadness, fear, helplessness and guilt

These are common reactions to the types of stress that disasters cause. For most people, these effects will fade over time, but if they are still present 4-6 weeks after the event it is important to seek help.

Should I watch the news?

During and after a distressing event, it's natural to want to access as much information as possible.

However, it's a balance to make sure you're getting the information that you need without over exposing yourself to harmful effects of repeatedly seeing or hearing stressful information. For many people, too much media exposure can increase feelings of distress.

Minimising exposure to stressful or traumatic images and sounds is particularly important for children.

Some tips for limiting your exposure to stressful media include:

- Video and photographic footage can be especially distressing
- Don't watch stressful footage repetitively
- Use news sources which are more likely to provide you the information that you need, rather than news sources which are repeating distressing stories or footage
- Children may misunderstand information that they have seen in the media. Talk to your children about what information they have seen in the news, and help explain the information they have heard in an age appropriate way.

How can I help my friends and family?

Distressing events can feel very overwhelming. Despite the enormity of the impacts, most people recover well from a disaster with the support of their friends, families, colleagues and neighbours.

¹ Note that this is adapted from our Emergency Program.

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When wanting to help loved ones, some people feel unsure about how they can best help, and worry that they may do the wrong thing. There are some simple things that you can do to support your friends and family members.

- Spend time with your family and friends.
- Offer support and listen.
- Be patient with people who have been impacted.
- Give people the time, space and patience that they need.
- Don't be afraid to ask people how you can help.

How can I look after myself?

Helping and supporting others through distressing events such as disasters can be stressful in itself. Communities, volunteers, friends and family members who are helping those who have been affected by a disaster also need to take care of themselves.

Some tips:

- Get good rest.
- Watch your diet and physical health.
- Look after your relationships. Communicate with people close to you and accept or ask for their support if it helps you or your children.
- Do things that make you happy. As much as possible, take part in activities and interests that make you feel good.
- Stay connected with your community, neighbours and other groups. Don't become isolated, as an individual or as a family.

What do I tell the kids?

It's very common for parents to worry about their children after a distressing event. Most parents worry about whether the behaviours their children are showing are commonly felt, and how they can best support them.

While a range of reactions in children is common, the strongest predictor of how children will recover is how the important adults in their life recover, so it's important that adults look after themselves. Think about it like putting on an oxygen mask when you're on a plane – you have to look after yourself first so that you can help other people.

Below are some examples of how children may react to a distressing event.

Reactions: Infants to 5 years - some common reactions include:

- returning to early behaviours like thumb-sucking,
- bedwetting or being scared of the dark
- sleep difficulties including night terrors
- changes to eating patterns and dietary habits
- separation difficulties, not wanting to be alone
- being easily startled, hyperalert or hyperactive
- challenging behaviours
- clinging to familiar people or things
- feeling unsafe or fears of a crisis event happening again
- forgetting new skills, manners or self-care behaviour
- facial expressions of fear
- crying, whimpering or screaming.

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Reactions: 6 to 11 years - they may experience any of the previous reactions, but also may:

- become depressed, anxious, naughty, aggressive
- be easily annoyed or irritable
- start fights
- have angry outbursts
- become quiet, and perhaps withdrawn and isolated around friends and family
- feel guilty
- feel numb emotionally
- complain of unfounded physical problems
- behave like a younger child
- be overactive or hyperactive
- struggle to pay attention, listen and remember
- not do well with school work.

Reactions: 12 to 18 years - may experience the previous reactions, but also may:

- feel guilty about the event or being unable to do more during the event
- become depressed
- become overactive or overinvolved
- isolate themselves from family and/or peer groups
- avoid reminders of the event
- have flashbacks, nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- regress in standards of self care
- over eat/under eat
- have difficulty with school or work
- struggle with family and peer relationships
- exhibit antisocial behaviour (like being disrespectful or destructive)
- take risks or behave dangerously

Reactions: 18 to 25 years – as above, but other reactions may include:

- feeling a strong sense of responsibility for injury to loved ones and damage to property
- increased stress levels due to work or study commitments
- difficulty finding routine again and managing previously 'normal' tasks
- laziness or apathy
- anger or annoyance at loss of independence or privacy
- questioning one's purpose in life
- difficulty prioritising and/or managing work, study and social demands.

Young adults will have their own relationships beyond the immediate family to nurture. Some may be parents themselves. They may also have financial, workplace or other responsibilities. All children and young people, regardless of their age, need parents to set good and consistent examples, especially when life is disrupted. Ensure they have people their own age to turn to if they need extra support.

How can I help my children cope?

After distressing events parents want to support their children in responding to and dealing with the events. Here are some tips.

What might be helpful:

- Make sure you take care of yourself
- listen to what they have to say. Answer their questions
- help children understand what happened. Be honest. Use information based on facts, not

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- rumour or hope
- reassure them about the future
- re-involve children in chores and responsibilities as soon as they can cope with them again
- try to keep a regular routine (reading before bed, eating dinner together, watching TV together)
- encourage play and fun
- make time for the family to be together and enjoy each other's company. Laugh
- be open about your thoughts and feelings. Children will be aware of them anyway
- allow emotions to be shared in the family but in a way which does not overwhelm
- let children cry, hang around you or the house, be clinging or physically close
- and praise children when appropriate.

What is less helpful:

- demand that children be brave or tough
- expect them to 'get over it' quickly
- expect them to take on responsibilities beyond their capability
- get angry if they show strong emotions
- force them to tell their stories or probe for personal details
- make promises you might not be able to keep
- bottle things up - try to express emotions openly, without overwhelming children
- pretend that you are okay

These agencies may be able to provide additional if you are experiencing difficulties coping after a distressing event has happened:

Contact your local doctor /GP

Phone Lifeline on 13 11 14

Phone Beyondblue on 1300 22 4636

Phone Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800

If you want more information about Australian Red Cross resources visit:

www.redcross.org.au/aftertheemergency or contact 1800 RED CROSS (733 276) or email contactus@redcross.org.au

