



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Communities**

# Disaster and Emergency Support Services

Dealing with the effects of a traumatic event



Information about ways to deal with the personal consequences of traumatic incidents caused by disasters such as bushfires, cyclones, earthquakes, floods or terrorist acts.





The effects of a traumatic incident are significant and can last a long time. People react differently to disaster or emergency situations and the way they cope is very individual. This brochure provides information about possible reactions and how to deal with them.

## Who to talk to at the Department

The Department of Communities is the State Government Department responsible for managing emergency welfare services during disasters and emergencies.

The Department's Emergency Services Unit coordinates responses to disaster emergency welfare situations and liaises with emergency service organisations and partnering welfare agencies to support the community & individuals affected.

The Department can refer you to qualified people who can help you take charge of your recovery.

For counselling and support contact:

### **Disaster Response Hotline**

Tel: 1800 032 965 (country free call)

For more information go to:

[www.communities.wa.gov.au](http://www.communities.wa.gov.au)

A disaster or emergency is usually unexpected and may involve a threat to your life and wellbeing. Your home, family and possessions may be impacted and you may witness or experience distressing events. Under these circumstances, it is normal to have an intense reaction even if you are only indirectly involved. Following are some of the reactions you may experience.



## Shock

Some people react with stunned disbelief or emotional numbness. You may feel cold and your skin may feel clammy. You may feel dazed, detached, 'frozen' and unable to speak or move. The situation may seem surreal and time may seem distorted. Afterward you may have difficulty with your memory and you may even begin to doubt what you saw or whether it even happened to you.

## Other physical reactions

Other physical reactions may include a pounding heart, trembling, feeling cold, sweating, chills and clammy skin, tiredness and fatigue. You may experience nausea and loose bowels. Head and muscle aches as well as sleeping difficulties and nightmares for at least a few days are not uncommon.

## Thinking problems

You may have problems thinking clearly and remembering simple things. You may also feel unable to stop thinking about what happened and find that you keep asking yourself 'What if' questions such as "What if I did something different? What if something else happened?"

Many people experience irritability,

anger, anxiety or frustration. You may even find that you avoid friends, family and talking about the event. Alternatively, you may feel an urgent need to talk with and be with others.

## Impact

The impact of what you experienced often begins after the initial shock has subsided.

You may have flashbacks where it seems you're re-experiencing the event again. These experiences can be disturbing and you may think you are going crazy – you are not. These are normal reactions to an abnormal event, which should disappear. To help them disappear it is important to talk to people about the event. Avoid isolating yourself or using drugs and alcohol to help with coping. Isolating yourself from others and using drugs and alcohol can delay recovery.

## Shame or guilt

It is not uncommon to feel ashamed because of your shock reaction and that you didn't respond to the event as you would have wished. You may feel guilty for having survived or for not having done enough for the victims of the tragedy. Remember, it is not unusual for people to have some of these reactions for some time after a traumatic event has occurred.

## Recovering from trauma

Recovering from a traumatic event can often be a challenging process, but it is also a natural process. Talking with family, friends, clergy and counsellors about what happened can help you recover. It may also help to talk with survivors of the incident who understand what you have been through. The more you talk about it with people who understand, the sooner the difficulties will pass.

## Taking care of yourself

It is important to take care of yourself following a traumatic event by:

- keeping in touch with people you are comfortable with
- talking about the event when you need to and expressing your changing thoughts and feelings as they arise
- allowing yourself time to come to terms with what happened or what you saw, rather than force the situation. It can take days to process memories of something unpleasant
- trying to return and stick to routines to create feelings of control and predictability
- establishing a sleep routine, and trying to get to bed at the same time each night
- taking part in leisure activities you enjoy
- using physical exercise to work off tension
- eating well balanced meals regularly even if you don't feel like eating
- trying relaxation exercises such as deep breathing or meditation to help calm your nervous system

## When to seek help

Sometimes reactions to the trauma of the disaster or emergency can often be more intense and last longer than people expect.

As it is an uncommon experience, people may not understand what is happening to them.

It is important to seek professional help if you are experiencing any of the following:

- problems **handling intense reactions or feelings**
- concern **about physical symptoms**
- have **no one to talk with**
- continue **to have disturbed sleep or nightmares**
- find **that relationships or family life are being affected**
- realise **your work performance or daily life function is suffering**
- you **find you are not enjoying activities that you used to look forward to.**



Avoid waiting until you find you are not coping – see someone as soon as possible.

Family and friends are often good judges of when help is needed.

## Ways to help others

Recovering from a traumatic event can often be a challenging process, but it is also a natural process.

If someone close to you is going through stress reactions it may be helpful to follow some simple guidelines:

- reassure them about safety and security if you can
- prioritise helping with immediate, practical tasks and basic needs
- it is often enough to just be with people when they are distressed, without necessarily saying or doing much
- listen to the person's account of the events by keeping your questions about the situation to a minimum. Instead, check your understanding of what they said and listen for as long as they want to talk
- help people who ask, but try also to help them problem solve and prioritise
- remind them to look after themselves physically by eating, resting and sleeping
- expect some moodiness and irritability – be accepting and forgiving

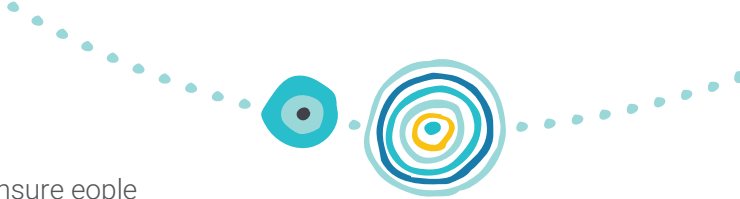
- continue with your own (and your family's) routine. Allow the person some time to settle back into their own routine and gently encourage them to do so
- try not to make light of the situation or talk them out of their reactions - it takes time to recover.

## Ways to help kids feel better

Parents are critical to helping children re-establish a sense of safety, assurance, self-esteem and understanding.

- Present yourself as being calm and in control. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives.
- Try to avoid appearing anxious or frightened. This does not mean that you should not pay attention to and deal with your own feelings. Children benefit from seeing their parents coping effectively with difficult feelings so try to put on a 'brave face'.
- Reassure children they are safe and (if true) so are other important adults in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out to the children things that help ensure their immediate safety and the safety of those around them.
- Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge. Explain that emergency workers, police, firefighters, doctors and nurses are helping people who are hurt





and are working to ensure people are safe.

- Let children know it is okay to feel upset. Explain that all feelings are okay. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay. Children may need support to find ways to express these feelings appropriately.
- Be accepting and patient. When feeling overwhelmed children can regress. They can temporarily lose life skills and abilities that they haven't fully mastered and can suddenly seem younger than they were. This is normal and a symptom that they are a bit overwhelmed, help them.
- Observe children's emotional state. Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
- Look for children at greater risk. Children who have experienced a past trauma, personal loss, have had difficult backgrounds, are a bit anxious or have special needs may be at greater risk than others of experiencing severe reactions.
- Seek the help of professionals if you are at all concerned.
- Tell children the truth. While you don't have to tell children everything, try not to pretend the event has not occurred or that it isn't serious. Children are smart - they will be more worried and anxious if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening or things aren't 'adding up'.
- Stick to the facts. Do not embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Do not dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
- Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. Early primary school children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change or will soon get back to normal. Upper primary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe.
- Encourage them to talk through their thoughts and feelings.
- Children may think they did something wrong to make the tragedy happen. They may need reassurance about this.

