

Tool kit

Coping with loss and change in a community after a natural disaster

Lifeline's coping with loss and change in communities tool kit will provide some practical information about:

Understanding loss and change in communities

Understanding common emotions during loss and change

Understanding reactions to stress

Developing some strategies to help cope with traumatic events

Loss and change in communities

Loss and change in a community following a natural disaster such as a bushfire, flood, storm or cyclone can be very challenging for the people directly affected. However, there are also implications for other workers, businesses, industries and the community as a whole.

People vary in how they respond and what affects them. Some people may be managing the situation. However, others may be finding it difficult to cope and are unsure of what the future may bring. Importantly, most people do experience healing and recovery following painful experiences as they rebuild their lives and develop new strengths. While recovery takes time, there are things we can do for ourselves and others that helps the healing and rebuilding process.

As an individual you may be wondering what you can do about this situation, how you can help and what effect your contribution is going to have. We need to remember that a community is made up of individuals who, when working together, can make a difference. As individuals we bring special qualities and experiences in dealing with personal and community loss and change, which we can use to assist others.



Our challenge as individuals and a community is to ensure that we look after ourselves, our families, our friends and other people we know. People under stress are often so busy dealing with day to day life that they do not notice the physical and emotional signs that indicate they are not coping. It is important to watch out for signs of stress in ourselves and in others, then find ways to strengthen personal resources and access support as needed.

For those of you who may be having some trouble coping or know someone who might be struggling, this information is a start to regaining some control over this situation.



Understanding common emotions during loss and change

Reactions to a traumatic event are often more intense in the first weeks following the event.

Usually these reactions ease over time, although you may experience some feelings for a longer period.

Each phase in recovering from a community disaster brings its own challenges as the full implications of rebuilding are recognised and addressed. The practical, emotional, physical and social impacts need to be faced.

Media coverage or alerts about similar events such as fires or floods can also trigger a heightened sense of anxiety that may be out of proportion to the immediate danger associated with them for you personally. Anniversaries and personal exposure to these events in future may also trigger anxiety along with experiences of associated smells (such as smoke) or visual scenes in the media.

Feelings that you can expect or may have experienced include:

Anger

- At what has happened
- At whoever or whatever caused it
- At those trying to help
- At the injustice, 'Why me, Why us?'

Helplessness

- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to change the situation

Fear

- Of 'breaking down' or 'losing control'
- Of losing the business, farm, lifestyle
- Of the uncertainty

Disappointment

- That life is turning out like this after so many years of hard work

Failure

- Blaming yourself when events are out of your control

Guilt

- For being better or worse off than others
- For surviving

Regret

- For things not done

Shame

- For being exposed as helpless, 'emotional' and needing others
- For not reacting as one would wish

Sadness

- For losses of every kind
- Longing for all that has gone
- Being tearful

Isolation

- Wanting to be alone
- Irritated or cannot bear the demands of being with others

Numbness

- Feeling empty inside or a loss of all feelings
- Feeling detached or withdrawn
- Having difficulty concentrating

Let Down

- A sudden loss of energy and enthusiasm
- Other people do not understand how you feel or what you have been through

If these reactions begin to interfere with your ability to carry out daily activities, talk with someone you trust, such as a friend, relative, GP or mental health professional.





Understanding reactions to stress

Loss, change and rebuilding can be very stressful. We all have stress in our everyday lives however in difficult times we often experience stress more frequently and with more intensity. Some symptoms of stress include:

Physical

- Tiredness
- Headaches
- Poor sleep
- Muscle aches/stiffness
- Chest pains
- Nausea
- Weight loss/gain

Behavioural

- Pacing
- Fidgeting
- Increased eating
- Increased smoking
- Increased drinking
- Yelling and blaming

Psychological

- Poor concentration
- Poor memory
- Indecision
- Racing thoughts
- Confusion

Social

- Withdrawal
- Overworking
- Less contact with family & friends

Emotional

- Mood swings
- Nervousness
- Worry
- Shame
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Anger



Developing some strategies to help cope with traumatic events

Everyone reacts differently to different circumstances.

It is important to allow ourselves time to process our circumstances and regain our sense of normalcy in our everyday lives following a traumatic event.

Here are some practical tips for managing reactions to traumatic events such as a natural disaster:

- When you are ready and in your own time, talk with others who care for you.
- Share your feelings, and encourage your children to talk to you and others about their emotions.
- Look after yourself – ensure you have a nutritious diet, enough sleep, and take time out to do the things you enjoy.
- Try to keep the rest of your life as normal as possible during the period of stress; establish a daily routine with regular times for sleep, meals, being sociable and physical activity.
- Accept the support of people who care.
- Take time to be with your close family and friends.
- Express your needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and those in helping professions.
- Explain to your children why expenditure is being cut back – they will cope.
- Try and let your family keep up with their activities as much as possible.
- Limit the amount of media coverage you are exposed to.
- Be more careful when working around the home.
- Remember – laughter is as good as a dose of medicine.
- Seek out professional help if required.

Places to go for help now:

- Talk to a trusted family member or friend, or a health professional such as your GP or Psychologist/Counsellor
- Connect with a helpline. Call Lifeline's 24 hour telephone counselling service on 13 11 14
- Young people can ring Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 or web and email counselling: www.kidshelp.com.au
- Utilise online resources. Some good reference sites include:

www.lifeline.org.au

www.disasterassist.gov.au

Looking after yourself after a disaster booklet

www.grief.org.au

www.psychology.org.au/bushfires

**[www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire/individuals/
respond_recover/emotional_support.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bushfire/individuals/respond_recover/emotional_support.htm)**

au.reachout.com

www.relationships.com.au

www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm

Acknowledgements:



Prime Super is the proud sponsor of the Lifeline Information Service – your mental health and self-help resource.

Prime Super is Australia's only nationally operating super fund dedicated to rural and regional Australia.

For more information on Prime Super, please ring 1800 675 839 or visit their website www.primesuper.com.au

Lifeline and Prime Super are working in partnership to promote mental health awareness, help-seeking and suicide prevention.



For 24 hour telephone counselling call 13 11 14
For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au
To donate call 1800 800 768

Source: This document has been adapted from information provided by Lifeline Community Care Queensland's Community Recovery Program.

This Tool Kit has been produced by the Lifeline Information Service as a public service. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration and with acknowledgement of Lifeline. We invite your feedback and comments at infoservice@lifeline.org.au

Last revised January 2010