



Impact of natural disasters on mental health

Natural disasters can be stressful and traumatic for children, young people and adults, with impacts on mental health and wellbeing

Natural disasters can affect our usual coping strategies

Natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, fires or cyclones, can be frightening events.

Being involved in or witnessing such events can result in a sense of loss of control or feeling overwhelmed, especially for children and young people who are dependent on adults for their safety. As a result, individuals may have difficulty coping during these times of stress.

Coping strategies are actions that we take to help us manage difficult emotions and deal with challenging events. These can be either healthy (improving the way we feel and managing our emotions) or unhealthy (actions which are detrimental to our mental or physical health in the short or long-term). Learn about [self-care following a natural disaster](#).

Natural disasters can be traumatic

Trauma is a psychological or emotional response to an event or an experience that's deeply distressing or disturbing.

Trauma experiences may impact on biological, psychological and social aspects of wellbeing.

Grief is an emotional reaction to a loss or change.

Grief can be experienced in varying forms and is not just related to the death of a person. Grief can be associated with loss of many things, including but not limited to, home, change in environments, routines and way of life.

[The Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit](#) contains resources to help and support children, young people and adults before, during and after a disaster or traumatic event.

Signs to look for

It's normal for children and young people to show signs of distress following a natural disaster.

Everyone experiences traumatic events differently, depending on a range of factors such as developmental stage, past experiences and current family and life circumstances. Depending on their age and developmental stage, children and young people might react in various different ways. As a guide, below is a list of common signs and symptoms you might observe, which may indicate a child or young person is experiencing trauma:

- complaints about physical health (for example, sore tummy or headaches)
- fear that something bad will happen to themselves or primary caregiver/s
- difficulties separating from primary caregiver/s and/or extreme clinginess
- nightmares and difficulty sleeping alone
- changes in thinking, slowed thought process
- withdrawal from normal activities, friends and social situations
- isolation (spending more time in their room or alone)
- new awareness of death and mortality
- difficulty talking about traumatic events
- decline in educational functioning, concentration and poor learning outcomes
- recounting negative events in play and stories
- appearing more alert and watchful for signs of danger.

Children and young people with additional needs

When supporting children and young people with additional needs within learning communities, be mindful that they're often more vulnerable and may have more difficulty coping with the impact of these events. Professionals with more specialised training may be required to help manage this support. The availability of these professionals will vary depending on the type and setting of your learning

community – so speaking to your wellbeing staff and leadership group for guidance is recommended.

Learn more about [providing support to children and young people following a natural disaster](#).

Being prepared is key to recovery

Learning communities that are prepared for natural disasters will have a better chance at managing trauma and grief if a natural disaster happens in your area.

Understanding how individuals and communities respond when faced with trauma or grief can assist in managing the mental health impact of natural disasters. This is known as 'preparedness' and has been shown to improve implementation of mental health support in times of difficulty following a natural disaster. It can also help to reduce the severity of the long-term impact.

Developing a critical incident management plan will ensure the best outcomes for children, young people and their families affected by natural disasters.

A critical incident management plan is a practical guide that guides a learning community's response to a critical incident. It aims to:

- provide a supportive, caring response to a critical incident that considers the mental health of all members of the learning community
- help the school or early learning service return to normal routine as soon as possible
- enable return to routine and an optimal learning environment
- minimise the adverse effects of a critical incident on the learning community.

Learn more about responding to critical incidents in the [Respond](#) module.