

Information Sheet for helping your mates following a natural disaster.

Most people will cope with a natural disaster by drawing upon their natural resilience, coping strategies and support systems. There is however, no single way people react or respond. We can expect a range of responses:

- Some will feel distressed, but bounce back after a short period of time;
- Some will feel largely unaffected;
- Some may feel the effects sometime later, particularly following a reminder of the disaster;
- Some will feel strengthened;
- A minority may develop more significant mental health problems.

How you can help? All you need to do is listen.

Encourage your mates to recognise that they have been through an extremely stressful event

Encourage them to give themselves time and space to acknowledge what they have been through and let them know that they may have an emotional reaction to it. Give themselves permission to feel rotten but know that they can cope with it.

Encourage them to focus on the positive aspects of the incident

The event may have been confronting and/or distressing, in many cases there are positive aspects that should be acknowledged. For instance, it is important for them to acknowledge to themselves that they did the best that they could do.

Encourage a sense of humour

It is important to try and maintain a sense of humour.

Encourage them to physically look after themselves

Get plenty of rest, even if they can't sleep, and try to eat regular, well-balanced meals. Be more careful than usual, they may be more vulnerable to accidents and physical illness. Regular exercise like walking, is very good at reducing the physical effects of stress. Participate in relaxing activities like listening to music and don't try to numb the experience with drugs or excessive alcohol, this could lead to more problems in the long term.

Encourage them to spend time with people they care about and who care about them

It's ok if they don't want to talk about the incident. Sometimes they will want to be alone; that's ok, as long as they don't isolate themselves. Connect with family, friends, colleagues, and community.

Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks can be normal

Allow these reactions but they should be decreasing over time. Try not to block them out or bottle up feelings. Confronting the reality, bit by bit, will help someone to come to terms with their experience.

When to listen and when to seek help

Deciding when to just listen and be supportive and when to encourage your mate to seek professional assistance can be difficult.

As a general rule, encourage your mate to talk with their GP if they are continuing to experience distress that is interfering with their everyday functioning.

For more information contact: Queensland Health Tackling Regional Adversity through Integrated Care (TRAIC) Clinician Denise Price on 0472 821 255 or email Denise.Price@health.qld.gov.au