

Queensland Floods

Practitioner Tips

Tips for providing practical and emotional support following a disaster

Immediately after a disaster, people may experience a range of emotional reactions that can be quite intense and unsettling. These reactions often resolve in the coming days and weeks and most people will recover by drawing on their own strengths and the support of others. However, some people will experience more persistent mental health problems that may require additional support and treatment.

Practical tips to help people get back on their feet

Ensure safety

As you go about providing support after a disaster, it is vital to ensure the safety of yourself and others. Follow public health warnings on sanitation. Limit your exposure and that of others to distressing scenes and media coverage.

Introduce yourself

Introduce yourself and explain your role. Tell the person what type of assistance you can provide – it's important to spend time listening to them and understanding their concerns.

Acknowledge the person's strengths

Acknowledge the person for doing the best they can under difficult circumstances. They are going through a very stressful period and it may take some time to deal with that.

Identify their main needs

One of the best ways to help someone is to identify their priority needs and then help them address these. What are the most pressing issues for them that you can help with? This could include providing information, comfort, practical assistance or referral to other services. Do your best to help with these.

Encourage self-care

Help the person identify what they can do to help take their mind off things and make them feel better. Can they go for a walk, read a book, listen to the radio? Can they resume some of their usual routines or activities? Are they eating well and getting sufficient rest? Encourage them to limit their use of alcohol or drugs.

Help them connect with others

The support of family and friends is particularly important for recovery, so encourage the person to keep in regular contact with people they trust. You may need to help them identify who those people are. For individuals who are isolated, help them identify ways in which they can stay connected with other people or services.

Find out if professional mental health support is required

Encourage and assist someone to seek professional help if they report that they're not coping and feel overwhelmed. Help them to speak with a GP, counsellor or other professional if they are experiencing severe emotional distress, if their emotional reactions are not improving as expected, or if they are finding it difficult to engage in day-to-day activities.

Seek urgent assistance if the person tells you they are having thoughts of ending their life or harming themselves or others. If the person is in immediate danger, do not leave them alone unless you are concerned for your own safety. For urgent assistance: call 000 or a mental health crisis service, contact the person's doctor, or attend a hospital emergency department.

Communication tips

Listening is an important part of providing emotional and practical support.

Be sympathetic and understanding of the person's situation and what they've been through.

If someone is visibly distressed:

- acknowledge their distress by saying something like, "I can see this is upsetting for you", give them a moment and let them know you're willing to listen, perhaps say, "It's up to you of course, but if you'd like to talk about what's upsetting you then I'm a good listener."
- ask the person to slow their breathing down (if required) to help them manage their distress and feel calmer.

Examples of helpful things you could say when providing support:

- "Those types of reactions you describe are pretty common; most people will experience similar emotional reactions in a difficult situation like this."
- "Looking after yourself and spending time with others can be very helpful at this time."
- "What has helped you in the past when you've had to deal with a lot of stress?"
- "I can see that you're wanting to tackle everything pretty quickly. You may want to pace yourself for a bit so that you don't put yourself under too much stress."
- "Keeping in touch with people is very helpful after a disaster."
- "Is there some time over the next week when you could catch up with a friend?"
- "It's tough now, but I'm confident that you'll get through this."
- "Well done. I think you're doing a great job of staying positive."

Try not to do the following:

- pressure someone to tell their story or talk about their feelings if they're not ready
- interrupt, cut off or rush someone's story
- touch the person if you're not sure it is OK to do so
- talk about other people's troubles, including your own
- judge how the person should feel or what they should do, for example, "You shouldn't feel that way" or "You just need to put it all behind you"
- use jargon, acronyms or technical terms that the person may not understand
- give false promises or false reassurances, for example, tell the person that you will ring them and then don't
- think and act as if you need to solve all the person's problems for them
- take away the person's strength and sense of being able to care for themselves
- talk about people in negative terms, for example, "She's a know-it-all", or "He's just a bit crazy".

Contact the Queensland Floods Practitioner Advice Line on Mental Health

for access to FREE and confidential
information, advice and resources.



Call 1800 260 618

Monday - Friday | 9am - 4pm (AEST)



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Online

www.phoenixaustralia.org/advice