

## FINDING HOPE

After a natural disaster, many emotions come to the surface. We can lose a sense of what is normal, we can feel a loss of control of our life, we can lose hope that things will ever improve. For some people, depression becomes an issue and we need to seek medical help. We need strong support and although we might be reaching out for help for the first time in our lives, help is available.

## RESTORING HOPE

- Try to believe that things will work out. Let your family members know that you believe that things will get better. If you have a faith in God, trust Him.
- Join with others in your larger community who can provide emotional support and encouragement.
- Search for stories about how other people survived and maintained hope in troubled times or how you can look at things from a different perspective.
- Make a list of your strengths and talents, and then list your options and resources. Help family members do the same.
- If watching news reports distresses you and your family, don't watch them. Change to an activity that will distract you and give you all some relief.
- Accept invitations to social events. Getting out and taking your mind off things is highly beneficial.
- Stay connected to community and family. Don't stay at home thinking about the disaster.
- Accept help. Take time out for yourself to restore a sense of calm. Ask people to mind your children even if only for an hour or so and take some leisure time.
- If you are feeling suicidal or you can't cope, get help. Reach out to your family or call SALVOS CARELINE on: 13 SALVOS (13 72 58).

## JUDGEMENT

Everyone deals with natural disasters in their own way. It is impossible to compare one person's recovery with another. The effect of a disaster can be impacted by the amount of stress that was in a person's life prior to the disaster. It can also be impacted by the amount of support and resources available to each individual. For example, a person who is isolated, has young children or has experienced trauma recently will have this to cope with as well as the disaster. The disaster may be the icing on the cake that makes the person feel they can't go on. A person who is well supported may feel the disaster has less of an impact on their life. One person's loss is different to another's.

As we heard Dr Rob Gordon say in the video on "Loss and Judgment", you may compare your loss with other people. One person losing a garden to fire maybe more significant to that person, due to the emotional connection to the garden, than the loss of a whole house to another person, who didn't like it anyway. Guilt is a waste emotion and does not assist anyone on the road to recovery. The important thing is to recognise your own needs and give yourself the time and allowance you need to get back on top. Thoughts such as "I've only lost my house, not a loved one, so I shouldn't feel bad", aren't helpful.

In the same way, many people have trouble accepting help, particularly from charities. Each person deserves financial and emotional assistance. There is no shame in accepting the generosity of others who have donated. One day you may be the one who is donating to others in need.

## JUDGING OTHERS

Whilst it is hard to understand another person's loss or grief due to the factors listed above, it is important that we don't pass judgment. As human beings it is easy to say "that person has lost more, so they deserve more assistance." What's most important is being kind to others and pulling together as a community to ensure that everyone recovers in the best way possible.

## HELPING YOUR CHILDREN TO UNDERSTAND AND COPE IN HARD TIMES:

After a disaster, children may witness anxiety and fear in usually confident parents and caregivers. Children may lose pets, cherished memorabilia, and toys; they may not understand why parents must dispose of contaminated belongings during the clean-up process. Children may also experience the horror of seeing severely injured people or dead bodies.

Adults may find it difficult to gauge the emotional impact of natural disasters on children, who often hide their symptoms to avoid worrying them.

Children and adults frequently experience traumatic reminders, during which individuals will suddenly relive all the emotions, fears, thoughts, and perceptions they initially had at the time of the disaster.

## COMMON EMOTIONAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPOSED TO A NATURAL DISASTER:

- Increased feelings of insecurity, unfairness, anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, despair, worry about the future, and dread of the disaster reoccurring.
- Reactions of distress and anxiety when reminded of the disaster.
- A reliving of the emotions and fears that are triggered by another event. For example, if the disaster was a flood then the trigger may be a storm or a news report of a flood elsewhere.
- Disruptive behaviours, irritability, temper tantrums, agitation, or hyperactivity.
- Clinging-dependent behaviours, especially when separating from parents or caregivers.
- Avoiding people or situations.
- Irrational fears (phobias).
- Behaving like a younger child and reverting back to a previous stage of development.
- Disturbances in sleep or appetite.
- Somatic symptoms, such as stomach aches or headaches.
- Increased concerns regarding the safety of family members, friends, and loved ones.
- School-based problems, with decreased motivation and a decline in school performance.

## WHAT TO DO:

- Talk about your concerns with your partner, trusted friend, family member, colleague, or counsellor. Choose someone who will support you, rather than judge you or make you feel worse.
- Talk to your children about what is happening. Be honest, but avoid alarming them unnecessarily. Let them know that, while things are hard, you have confidence that no matter what it takes, you can handle it together as a family. Use language that they can understand. For younger children, you may have to repeat the conversation several times.
- Don't provide too much information. Simply state the facts and don't dwell on the gruesome details.
- If you feel that your children are not coping, seek help sooner rather than later.
- Encourage your children to talk about their concerns with you or another trusted adult. If you or your older children are feeling scared about life, make a list of options, resources, and personal strengths. Include ways you or family members got through earlier hard times. Use this list to make empowering 'self statements' that give you the energy to complete needed tasks.
- Prioritise leisure time for yourself and your family.
- Try to be creative in planning family time. Look for free or inexpensive activities: have a board or card game night, play sports or video games, go on a hike or picnic. Encourage your children to do activities like these with their friends. Lack of money doesn't have to mean lack of fun.
- Be patient with younger children who may cling more to you.
- Let older children know that, while they may worry about their problems, they also can work out ways to feel better, such as working hard on a school project or helping others with a community activity.
- Make sure that you and your children get enough sleep, eat regularly, drink plenty of water, and get frequent exercise.

## TALKING WITH YOUR TEENAGER AFTER A NATURAL DISASTER:

Teenagers react to trauma in similar ways to adults. They may feel that the world has suddenly become a dangerous and unsafe place. They may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and may not understand how to cope with these feelings.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP:

- Help your teenager talk about the disaster. Let them know that their feelings are normal, whatever they may be. Try to listen carefully and understand what they are saying. When you talk about the event, be honest and encourage them to be honest as well. Don't diminish the nature of the tragedy or dismiss your teenager's worries. Let your teenager share their feelings and concerns with you as honestly as they can at this time and then respond to their issues with age- appropriate honesty.
- Talk about what happened and share clear, accurate information. Ask your teenager what they think has happened and what other kids at school are saying. If they have any misconceptions, this is a chance to help correct misinformation. If your teenager knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with them about their fears.
- Try to be patient if your teenager asks the same questions again and again. Let your teenager talk as often as they need to about the disaster. Talking about the disaster with you is a way for your teenager to unburden themselves, narrow down what's really bothering them, and gain control of their feelings.
- Talk with your teenager about your own feelings. Explain how the trauma is affecting you. But don't burden your teenager with your fears and worries.
- Share your teenager's concerns and how you responded to them, with other family members. It will help give a consistent message, that everyone is delivering the same kinds of message and information. Remember, if your teenager told you something in confidence, then respect that and don't share that specific information so that they will continue to trust you.
- Reassure your teenager that your family and community are safe now and that events like these are rare. Help your teenager assess the likelihood of this ever happening again.
- Remember that this may be the first time your teenager has experienced grief. Expect an array of feelings - anger, sorrow, fear, confusion, and sometimes guilt if others have died. Assure them that all of these feelings are normal. If there has been a previous loss, this may bring up old pain. Take the time to reflect on how they dealt with and recovered from prior losses. By focussing on what has helped them cope previously, it will help increase their self-confidence in this loss.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP: (Cont.)

- Your teenager may feel afraid and upset following the disaster and may no longer feel 'normal.' They may show their fears in ways that they did when they were younger - by having nightmares, crying, being clingy, or being overly fearful. These behaviours are normal. Try to be loving, patient, and understanding. Coping with a natural disaster takes time. Your teenager needs extra love and support from you during this recovery period.
- It might be a good idea to limit the amount of TV news coverage your teenager sees. Too much repeated coverage could just heighten your teenager's anxiety.
- Don't assume that just because your teenager hasn't commented on the disaster that they are OK and aren't affected by it. Sometime teenagers are confused by a traumatic event. They want to avoid talking about it, or are afraid to show their vulnerability. You may need to take the first step and encourage them to talk.
- Help your teenager find comforting routines as a way to cope. Encourage them to listen to familiar music, do artwork, play sport, or participate in other normal activities. This is a time to keep routines simple and even to encourage establishing new activities.
- You might suggest that your teenager keep a journal to record their thoughts, feelings, and worries. This can be helpful in coping with powerful emotions, disturbing thoughts, and feelings of grief. It can also be a concrete way for them to track their recovery process.
- Encourage your teenager to become involved as a way to overcome feelings of helplessness. Powerlessness is painful for young people as well as adults.
- Encourage your teenager to stay connected with others, to see friends and continue with normal activities. Many adolescents are wonderful at rallying together to help each other in times of need. Encourage your teenager to reach out to friends as well.
- Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance. Your teenager's attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for a while and they may have difficulty concentrating.
- Encourage your teenager to talk with friends and with other adults. This might be a teacher, school counsellor, member of the clergy, or someone else from the community that your teenager feels close to and trusts.
- Give your teenager extra attention, patience, and support at this time. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.
- Seek support from others regarding your teenager. Because you are also responding to trauma, it is very important to talk to other parents, friends, counsellors, and other adults. Share your anxieties and frustrations with them. And don't be afraid to ask for help.



## HOW YOU CAN HELP: (Cont.)

- While supporting your teenager, look after yourself. Give yourself time to reflect on what happened. Stop long enough to know what you're thinking, how you're feeling, and how well you're coping. Get objective help from a mental health professional for yourself, and also to help you learn the best ways to deal with your teenager.

Usually, a teenager's reactions to a traumatic event do not last long. But sometimes fears can last and interfere with enjoyment of everyday life.

Warning signs that this might be the case include the following:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- changes in behaviour (unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness)
- angry outbursts, acting-out behaviour
- excessive clinging
- excessive crying
- headaches or stomach aches
- alcohol or drug abuse
- change in appetite (increased or decreased)
- loss of interest in once-pleasurable activities
- drop in grades
- isolation, spending more time than usual alone
- needing to be around other people all the time

If your teenager is experiencing any of these signs for a prolonged period of time or if the signs could put your teenager at risk, seek expert help.



## STILL KIDS – LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF IN TIMES OF EMERGENCY

Disasters are frightening things to both adults and young people. It's important that everyone looks after themselves after a crisis or emergency

### TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- Don't blame yourself if you see people upset. You might see some adults crying, or getting unusually angry. When people get hurt or lose their homes or friends, it is a very upsetting time. So if someone has spoken to you in an angry way, do not worry, it is not your fault and not their fault either.
- Don't blame anyone. Bad things happen to good people. We do not understand it when bad things happen, especially when good people get hurt. Your parent's might be blaming themselves for what happened. You might be too. Remember, it's not your fault and not their fault either.
- Talk about your feelings. If anything is worrying you at all, it's important that you speak to someone about it. You may have questions about what has happened, or what is going to happen. It's okay to have these questions and to ask them. It will help if you talk to someone. Tell them what you know and ask them questions about anything you do not understand. You can talk to them about what is worrying you or upsetting you.
- Safety is very important. Now the crisis is over, your caregivers are going to make sure you are safe. Do what they say. They want to keep you safe.
- It's also important to remember to have fun. When people are feeling hurt or upset, they sometimes think it is not the right time to have fun. But, going out to a movie or playing a game can be a good thing for you to do. You should have times when you can enjoy yourself.
- Everyone needs help at some time. If you say yes to any of the following, then talk to someone about how you feel:
  - Do you feel anxious?
  - Do you feel afraid?
  - Do you feel panicky?
  - Do you feel so angry you don't know what to do?
  - Are you waking up in the night feeling really scared or worried?
  - Are you having nightmares?
  - Has your appetite changed?
  - Do you sometimes get images in your mind of the thing that happened?
  - Are you having headaches, stomach aches or indigestion?



## HELPING OTHERS THROUGH A DISASTER

Helping someone through the emotional trauma of a disaster can be difficult and confusing. You may wonder what you can say to help.

It's most important to respect the person's need to feel bad. Don't think you need to cheer them up or move them on. As soon as we take that approach the person will not feel understood or heard and they will feel they can't really confide in us. In some cases they may feel they have to put their feelings aside to reassure us because we can't cope with how they're feeling.

The most important thing we can do for people who are in a very bad space is to keep them company where they are. We can't actually solve their problems but we help with the practical things, we can just sit with them and we can support them by our presence.

We want to give them the right message. Instead of saying, 'you're tough, you're resilient, you can get through this', we want to give a message of hope. 'This is going to be hard, and I know you feel bad but I'm going to be here and I will help you get through this'.

The other thing to remember is when people are in a state of emotional crisis, it takes an enormous amount of energy, emotionally and physically. They can't stay in the state of crisis indefinitely. If someone is weeping, if someone is in a moment of despair, if someone is full of anger and talking about how deeply they resent things, we need to listen to them and let them feel that they've got at least one person whose actually trying to understand them.

At some stage, they will start to settle down and move on. They will tell you that they are starting to feel better. This happens not because we've told them that they're going to be okay, but because we've been listening to how bad they have been feeling. When hope starts to appear, we can then come up with some suggestions and some reassurances to help.

## UNDERSTANDING RECOVERY: THE FIRST STAGE OF RECOVERY

As the threat of a disaster looms, people move into an emergency survival state and that's governed by the way adrenalin switches on in our brains and saturates our whole bodies. When that happens we become totally programmed for survival and in order to do that we become totally focused on experiencing things physically in our immediate environment. That's what our survival depends on – where's the flood, the fire, where's the gunmen, what do I need to do to survive? People will help whomever they have around them, and that's more or less independent of previous relationships. They will take care of people because they are other human beings and it's as though everybody often reverts back to a very primitive state of physical survival.

This gives us an enormous advantage because the adrenalin state increases our energy level, all of our reserves of sugars, red blood cells and so on pour into our blood stream, our heart rate goes up, our blood pressure increases and the blood flow is re-directed away from unnecessary organs all into the big muscles. In the brain, adrenalin causes us to focus on the right side of our brain where we can think very quickly in pictures. And so we go into a very simplified type of functioning. Our reaction times are short, and we make split second decisions and see things in very simple terms. In order to perform well outside our normal capacity, which is what we need to do to survive, we must shut down the normal feedback process. So, people fighting the Black Saturday fires would say they didn't experience hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain or even heat while they were busy fighting the fire. And this illustrates how adrenalin shuts down the feedback system to our own body.

Everyone would know that you don't feel the pain of a bruise in a sporting competition, you feel it afterwards in the shower, when the adrenalin's faded away. That shows how adrenalin shuts down the pain receptors in the body and there are lots of complex physical pathways by which this happens. The simple message is, when you're on adrenalin you don't know how you are because you're focused on what you need to do.

So, as people come out of this state in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, lots of people congregate together to take stock of what's happened. Often a lot of other people come into the affected environment; sometimes we talk about that as a state of convergence. If we are not careful those people coming into help are also in a very heightened state of adrenalin. The normal privacy and boundaries between people momentarily disappear. Everybody wants to take care of everyone and everyone wants to know what's happening. An enormous amount of support and care come to light -altruism, volunteering, community spirit. There's often an almost unrealistic sense of high spirits about surviving and this is very helpful in the short term because it helps everyone work together to deal with the immediate problems.

## UNDERSTANDING RECOVERY: THE FIRST STAGE OF RECOVERY (Cont.)

What's important is that people realise that there are certain things about this that are not going to serve them in the long term. As soon as possible, we need to begin to re-establish personal boundaries, privacy, and intimacy with those who are closest to us. It's important to take time out to reconstruct the fabric of family life ... that if one's house is being made available to people that there are times when the family who are in the house can just have some quiet time together. Otherwise people find that all aspects of their life become derailed, disrupted and they don't get a chance to start restoring the things that are going to help them most of all to get through the event; intimate relationships, ability to talk quietly with trusted people who will understand you and so on.

In the few weeks after the event, as long as people feel under threat they will remain in this adrenalin mode. Now, the threat may be - I don't know what's happened to some of my family and my loved ones or friends, it may be, I don't know where I'm going to live, it may be I don't know whether the insurance company is going to pay, anything that creates uncertainty about our immediate experiences is a threat. So there are often periods of weeks or months where virtually nothing happens in a person's recovery.

Often the focus of a lot of people on the boundaries of the disaster are the tangible losses, the houses that have been destroyed, the community resources disrupted, the financial problems. Those people will generally say, it's all about replacing your house, your business, your fences, your property, your car, your clothing, etc. Whilst this is important, all of those things only make sense when you've got a social life, personal and emotional life that makes sense.

The first thing that people have to do is to start thinking about how they're going to get through this really difficult time. If people keep coming in, hyping them up and focusing them on having to make very rapid decisions, such as clean up and where they are going to be, then they remain in the adrenalin state, they keep functioning in a way that's disconnected from themselves.

It's very important to allow people to take time to settle, to leave things until they're ready to deal with them and they will deal with them in their own time. This may seem to be a very long time for people outside the area who are in this wanting to help state. But anything that restores a person's ability to think about their situation, to make decisions, to lay plans, to unfold things in an orderly calm, measured way is starting them on their recovery process.

## THE SECOND STAGE OF RECOVERY:

Probably somewhere between a few weeks and a few months things stabilise for people. They know where they are going to live, they've got their interim finances sorted out, and have probably got some idea whether insurance payments are going to cover things. Then they move out of adrenalin because adrenalin is about threat. They're not quite under threat but now they've got a long and uncertain future ahead of them where every aspect of their life is in a state of disruption.

When we move into the state of coping, we have different body chemistry and the chemical that works there is one that puts us into an endurance mode, it's no longer an emergency survival mode. So, people in this state are governed by the chemistry of cortisol and a range of different chemicals in the body that relate to these kinds of compounds. Whilst adrenalin maximises energy and activates all of our organs to do what they need to do, cortisol preserves them. People go into a modified state of constantly conserving, therefore doing as little as they can and just plodding along, maintaining the things that need to be done, and as much as possible ignoring everything else. This state means that people don't put any energy into things that don't give them immediate benefit. It is common for people to boil over into feelings of despair and anger at frustrations. They may have meltdowns where they weep, but then they'll tend to shut off and get going again. And when they're going along they're a little bit like robots, just plodding along, not feeling too much, just doing whatever they have to do. This state goes on as people begin to solve the multiple problems of recovery and if they're not careful they'll keep the focus on the simple, tangible tasks of recovery - negotiating with insurance companies, working out about having repairs or rebuilding or whatever done.

For people with property they are working from dawn till dusk rebuilding fences and replacing things, cutting down trees and shovelling mud and so on and this state allows us to go on for very long periods of time working, working, working. There are a couple of other aspects of this cortisol state that are really important to understand and that is, it's about conservation of energy. In order to achieve this, people can tend to let relationships slide. We can forget to be kind to others and get on with the job at hand.

During the Black Saturday fires, a farmer reported that after he'd been on this overload working mode for some six to nine months, he came in from his farm at dark, flopped down in front of the chair, started watching the TV like a zombie and his five year old daughter was playing on the floor. She looked up at him and said, "Daddy, how come you never talk to us anymore"? And he had the presence of mind to realise that this was a very important message, that he was totally neglecting his relationships.

This is what inevitably happens to all of us when we go into that cortisol mode. We ignore and disregard the things that will actually preserve the quality of our life.

The pitfall of not prioritising recreation and family time during the cortisol phase can mean a fall out down the track.

## THE SECOND STAGE OF RECOVERY: (Cont.)

People can go for some months without paying any attention to themselves using up their reserves, just in the same way if we've got a decent credit card, we can spend on it for some time before suddenly it bounces. The time when that starts to show up for a lot of people is about six months down the track. If they haven't been taking time out and taking care of themselves, then around about six months quite a lot of people start to hit the wall. Sometimes they will realise that they just can't go on, they feel totally exhausted. Sometimes they'll have various physical complaints but often they'll start to feel emotionally overwhelmed with despair.

The key thing we have learnt from previous disasters is that what people need to take care of most of all is what they can't replace, their marriage, their relationship with their children, their health, their recreational activities, their career, their connection to their community, and friendships. These are the things that enable us to have an enjoyable life. As we try to keep putting energy and attention into these very important parts of our life, we can then replace our houses as we can.

Whilst it's not true of everyone, we can say from experience that very often those people who drop everything else in favour of dealing with their physical losses don't recover as well as those who take time to think and plan. The people who hold their lives together, put energy into their social life and their relationships, are often the ones that will come out of the disaster much better in the long run.

The time frame of recovery is usually between 2-5 years, to understand why it's taking so long. In my experience it's absolutely normal if we understand this element of the disruption of every part of a person's life, then we can appreciate why it is that people take quite a long time to get onto the most obvious, tangible problems. It can be difficult for loving family and friends outside the area to not really understand how complex and difficult it is to recover, and why it takes so long.

## THE THIRD STAGE OF RECOVERY:

After a recent natural disaster one woman who had lost her daughter talked about the next stage of life in the following way. "You know my daughter would have got married and had children some time in the next 2-3 years and I was looking forward to the next stage of my life as I was going to be a grandmother, but that's not going to happen now, and I'm not sure what to actually focus the next stage of my life on." This is what we call in psychology an identity problem.



## THE THIRD STAGE OF RECOVERY: (Cont.)

There are two sorts of identity problems. One is that the plans I had for my life, that told me who I was, and where I was going, have suddenly been disrupted and I have to think again. We begin to ask questions such as has this massive experience suddenly changed my view of life and myself and other people? Do I need to build some new goals? It's very important that people take the time to answer those questions, which is probably a task for the third year after the event.

The second aspect to the identity problem and that people look back at what they've been through and say, "gee that's a massive experience, I haven't really thought about it, 'I've been too busy'". So, it's in the 3rd or 4th year that people are thinking back. They want to put the story together and find out what it all means. So, again, it becomes very important for people to participate in community rituals like anniversaries and designing memorials and celebrating survival and community arts projects. It's all about putting the story together and helping people to work out who they are now.

So, we have survival mode on adrenalin, then we go into endurance mode on cortisol and in both those states we're neglecting many other aspects of our life that are not actually relevant to the immediate disaster situation. This takes us into an identity crisis when all those other issues have to be picked up again - who am I? Who am I now? Where am I headed? Is that the same place I was before? Or do I need to actually start to build a new plan for my life?

The people who put energy into that will often say, well down the track, "you know, I think my life is actually much richer as a result of it although I wish I never had gone through it, I think I've benefited from it".

That's what we regard as really good recovery.

## TIPS:

- Don't judge your emotional reaction to the disaster against others. Every person's loss and recovery is different.
- Protect family boundaries and privacy even if you are helping others.
- During the second stage of recovery, prioritise your relationships, career and leisure above the rebuilding and replacement of material assets. These are the things that can't be replaced.
- Allow others to take their time to recover. The average time period is 2 to 5 years.
- Stay connected to your community. Share your thoughts and feelings with others. Join groups and take time to build your social outlets.