

# LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF AFTER A DISASTER



**beyondblue**  
the national depression initiative



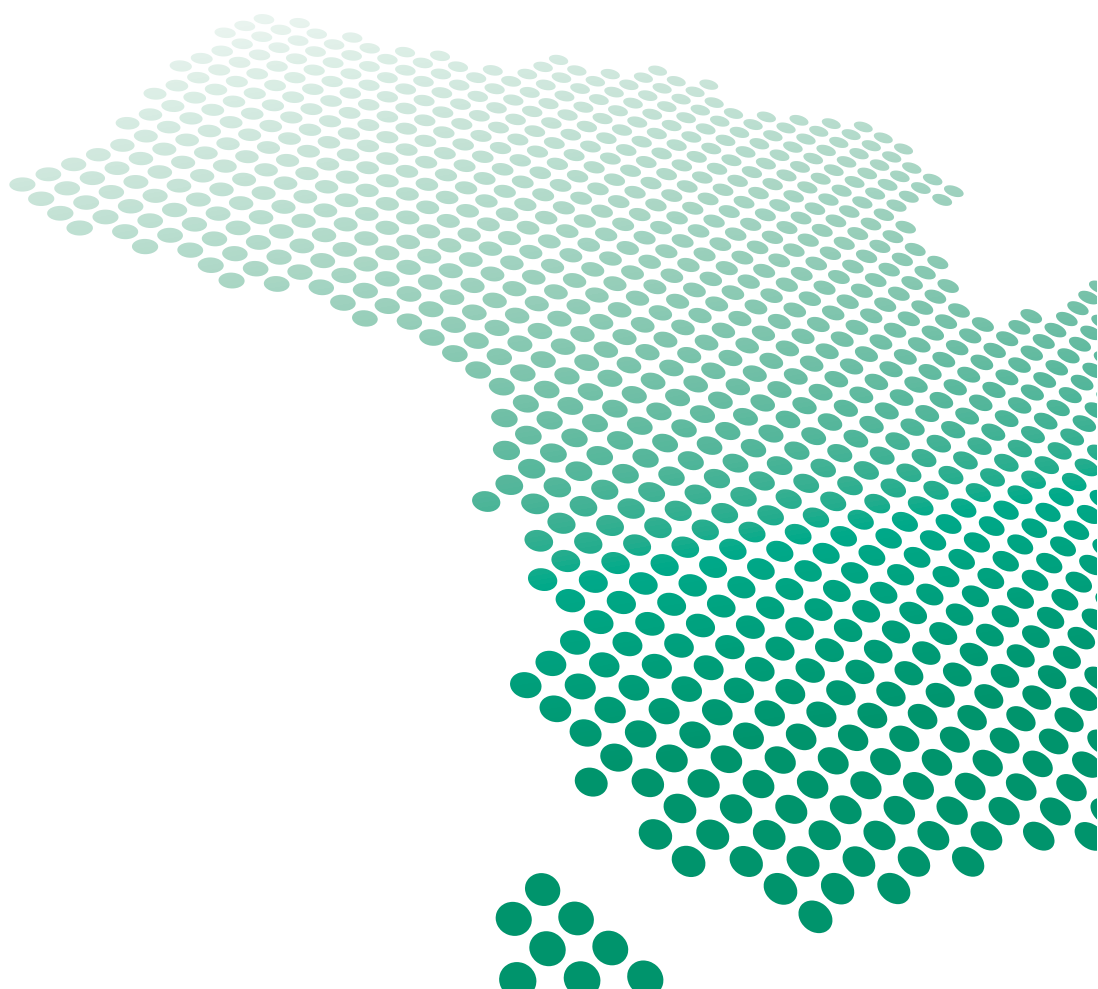
**Australian Red Cross**  
THE POWER OF HUMANITY



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# INTRODUCTION

In Australia we are accustomed to floods, storms, fires, cyclones and prolonged drought. Occasionally, severe disasters occur and can catch even the most conscientious and well-prepared people off-guard. Lives and property can be lost with little warning, causing a great deal of heartache and suffering.

Immediately after a serious disaster, a person may experience a range of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that can be intense, confusing and frightening. These are common reactions to an extraordinary situation. Most people recover after disasters by drawing on their own strengths and the support of others, and most will gradually rebuild their lives and achieve a sense of well-being again. However, some people may go on to develop a psychological problem. It's important to know the difference between a normal reaction to a stressful or potentially traumatic event and the signs that indicate you should seek additional assistance.

This booklet is designed to help you understand the reactions you – or someone you know – may be experiencing. It contains practical advice, numbers to call and websites to visit if you need extra information or support.

Following a disaster, it's important to remember that **you are not alone** and that **help is available**.



# COMMON REACTIONS TO AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENT

When a person experiences a stressful or traumatic event such as a disaster, it can have a profound impact on the person's psychological well-being. People may experience many different *emotional* and *physical* reactions which vary in severity depending on how close that person was to the event and the degree of loss the person may have experienced.

## Common reactions to a disaster

Common reactions experienced following a major traumatic event include:

- feelings of fear, sadness or anger
- feeling overwhelmed
- feeling numb, detached or withdrawn
- difficulty with focusing attention and concentration
- difficulty planning ahead
- tearfulness
- unwanted and recurring memories or bad dreams related to the event
- sleep problems
- constant questioning – “What if I had done x, y or z, instead?” and “What will happen now?”
- ‘replaying’ the event and inventing different outcomes in order to be prepared should it happen again.

These reactions can be quite strong and are often at their worst in the first week. They are not signs of weakness. In most cases, they fade over the following weeks, although the person may experience them from time to time for a much longer period. However, if at any time these reactions seriously affect a person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities at home or at work, it's important to discuss it straight away with a General Practitioner or mental health professional.

## Grief

Grief after the death of a loved one, a pet, or loss of property, can be felt intensely for a long time after the event. Everyone copes differently, but the intensity of the feelings usually diminishes with time. A person may feel one or all of the following:

- a short-lived sense of unreality or feelings of detachment from the world
- numbness, shock and confusion
- anger and self-blame or blaming others for the outcome
- an inability to find anything meaningful and be able to make sense of the experience – “Why has this happened to me?” and spiritual questions – “Where is God in this?”
- feelings of despair and loneliness
- sleep disturbances and changes in appetite
- emotional distress so severe it feels like physical pain
- fatigue
- flooding of memories or preoccupation with thinking about the person who has died
- loneliness or longing for the person who has died
- stress about financial problems, parenting and practical concerns.

Grief reactions can persist and, for some, remain intense for a long time. Having grief counselling and/or becoming involved with support groups are some ways that you can help yourself and your family deal with these experiences. See also *beyondblue* **Fact Sheet 28 — Grief, Loss and Depression.**

## Survivor guilt

Some people connected to the disaster may also be feeling guilty because they survived, but family members, friends, neighbours and people in their community did not. Survivor guilt is common after a natural disaster and can become a problem for some people if those feelings of guilt are particularly extreme or prolonged. Guilt can also get in the way of asking for help (e.g. “I don’t deserve help.” or “Others need it much more than I do.”).

# DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF A NATURAL DISASTER

Following a disaster, it's important to find ways to regain a sense of safety and control. People often need to have access to a safe and secure environment, to find out what happened to family members and friends and to have access to relevant services. There are steps you can take to make the situation more manageable for you and your loved ones.

## Helping yourself

- **Spend time with family and friends.**

Spending time with close friends and loved ones is critical following a disaster. Ensure that you have regular contact with people whom you trust and who support you. Ask for practical help and support when you need it – people often want to help and appreciate knowing what you need.

- **Try to get back to a routine.**

This is very important, particularly if you have children. It can be hard at first because life may be chaotic, but try to think of ways you can return to the pre-disaster routine as soon as possible – for example, eat at the same time you would normally eat each day.

- **Try to be healthy.**

Although your life might be disrupted right now, do what you can to eat a balanced diet and get some regular exercise – even if it's just going for a walk. Evidence shows regular exercise can improve mood. Looking after your body will help you gain the strength you will need to get through this time. Also, balance exercise with regular rest, relaxation and adequate sleep. Read *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 30 – Healthy eating for people with depression, anxiety and related disorders** and *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active** – available online from [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or by calling the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636**.

- **Take time out.**

Do things that you enjoy. This sounds simple, but often after a disaster enjoyable activities become low priority as the task of reconstruction is viewed as more important. It's important, despite it all, to take part in enjoyable activities. You may find it useful to use the worksheet at the back of this booklet to help plan some enjoyable activities.



- **Limit the amount of media coverage you watch, listen to, or read.**

While getting information is important, watching or listening to news bulletins too frequently can cause people who have experienced a disaster to feel distressed.

- **Write down your worries.**

You may find it helpful to write down your worries and concerns and use the problem-solving worksheet at the back of this booklet to identify some practical steps you can take to address those issues. Identify the specific feelings you are experiencing and the concern/worry that may be underlying each of these feelings.

- **Express yourself on paper.**

For some people, writing about their experience can be helpful, particularly if they find it difficult to talk about it. Although some distress is normal during this process, if you find writing down your experience too distressing or overwhelming, don't continue.

- **Accept help when it's offered.**

When disasters occur, they often affect people who have never before had a reason to access government or crisis support services. Getting help can be uncomfortable for some people who are not used to accepting assistance. However, there is no reason not to accept the kindness of others now – you would help them if the situation was reversed.

- **Don't expect to have the answers.**

When something unexpected happens, there are no guarantees about how the future will turn out. It is normal to feel unsure and confused.

- **Realise you are not alone.**

Grief, loss and shock, sadness and stress, can make you feel like isolating yourself from others. It may be helpful to remember that many people are feeling the same as you and will share your journey of recovery. Shutting yourself off from others is unlikely to make the situation any better.

**“You need to allow family, friends and the wider community to give. It will make you stronger and, years from now, will be an incredible insight into what others need in times of trauma – because you’ve been there and you understand.”**

Liz Tilley, whose house was destroyed in the 2003 Canberra bushfires

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- **Have a plan for anniversaries.**

Anniversaries of the event can be upsetting, particularly if the media coverage is intense. There may be formal events to mark the anniversary which you are invited to attend. There may also be informal events arranged by those affected. You may find these times difficult, so it is helpful to have a plan to reduce the impact. Limit your exposure to media coverage, plan your day with relaxing and enjoyable activities and make sure you have people available to support you, should you need it.

- **Plan for the future.**

Disasters will happen. When you are ready, you can use your experience to be more prepared should you ever be involved in a disaster again. The Red Cross has produced a useful booklet called *Four Steps to Prepare Your Household* which is available at [www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au)

**“When a disaster strikes, we are reminded of the amazing generosity, kindness and compassion of others. I am forever grateful to the friends, relatives, work colleagues, acquaintances and strangers who did what they could to help us in the weeks, months and years after the fires.”**

Liz Tilley, whose house was destroyed in the 2003 Canberra bushfires

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## **There may be a temptation to cope with trauma after a disaster by engaging in unhelpful activities that are likely to get in the way of your recovery from the disaster.**

- **Using alcohol or drugs to cope**

Although these may make you feel better in the short term, overuse or prolonged use of alcohol or drugs can cause serious problems for you and your loved ones.

- **Keeping yourself busy and working too much**

Keeping busy is good up to a point, but throwing yourself into work or other activities as a way of avoiding painful feelings can be unhelpful in the long term.

- **Engaging in stressful family or work situations**

Sometimes these are hard to avoid, but, whenever possible, try to reduce stressful interactions between you, your loved ones and friends.

- **Withdrawing from family and friends**

It's OK to allow yourself some time on your own if you need it, but try not to spend too much time alone.

- **Stopping yourself from doing things that you enjoy**

Sometimes, after disasters, people feel they should not enjoy themselves in the midst of so much suffering. That doesn't help anyone – it's good for you and others to try to participate regularly in enjoyable activities.

- **Avoid talking about what happened**

Not everyone is ready to talk at the same time, but most people find that it's very helpful to talk to someone they can trust about what happened and how they are coping.

- **Taking risks or making major life decisions**

Often, after experiencing a disaster or trauma, people take unnecessary risks or make significant decisions about relationships, accommodation or work. This is not a good time to be making those decisions – take your time. Even decisions such as rebuilding after a disaster are often best left for a year or two if possible, so don't feel pressured to make an early decision just because others are doing so.

# WHEN THE REACTION OR DISTRESS DOES NOT SETTLE

While it is normal for people who have experienced a traumatic event to go through a range of emotional reactions, for some people the distress persists and they may be at risk of developing a mental health problem, such as:

- depression
- prolonged or complicated grief
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- other anxiety disorders
- problems with alcohol and/or drugs.

For more information on these conditions, see the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or call the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**.

People who have experienced deeply upsetting things, such as the death of a family member, a friend and/or neighbours, may take a long time to adjust to these changes and regain a sense of normality.

There are signs to look for in yourself and in others to indicate that what you are experiencing may be beyond a normal reaction.

## Warning signs

*If you or someone you know experiences any of the following symptoms at any time, seek professional help:*

- If the distress feels extreme or interferes with the person's ability to participate in day-to-day activities
- Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- Panic symptoms: increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet
- Avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened to the point where day-to-day tasks cannot be carried out
- Excessive guilt about things that were or weren't said or done
- Loss of hope or interest in the future
- Thoughts of ending one's life or self-harming.



As a general rule, it's a good idea to seek help if you think that you are not coping. You should speak to a health professional if:

- your problems seem too severe
- the emotional reactions are lasting too long
- you're finding it difficult to engage in day-to-day activities or get along with family and friends.

## Everyone can access assistance

Most people who have experienced a disaster will go through times when they find things difficult or challenging and it is important to understand the benefits of professional assistance. Don't think you need to be struggling or suffering severely to access help. You may find it useful to talk to someone who is not a friend or family member. Many people find that one or more visits to a counsellor, chaplain or psychologist greatly assists their recovery. Making the decision to access professional assistance if you need it is a wise choice that can often help you to regain emotional strength and resilience.

**“Six years on, I still feel an enormous faith in the human spirit, our ability to survive, and the compassion and generosity we can offer each other.”**

Liz Tilley, whose house was destroyed in the 2003 Canberra bushfires

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# AM I MORE AT RISK?

Research suggests up to one in five people who have been directly affected by a disaster may develop psychological problems. Getting help early is the best way to prevent problems down the track. You may be more vulnerable to developing a mental health problem if you:

- have experienced the death of family members and friends, or suffered the loss of livelihood or possessions such as a home
- were in great fear for your life or that of your loved ones during the disaster
- have been seriously injured or have witnessed disturbing things
- have experienced a series of stressful life events leading up to the disaster or following the disaster, such as being made redundant or going through a divorce
- have limited social support available to you
- have a history of psychological problems.

It's important to talk to a General Practitioner or a mental health professional if you are concerned.

## How family and friends can help

- **Give them a break.**

Recognise that the person has just been through an extremely stressful event. He/she will need time and space to acknowledge the extent of the losses. You can help by doing practical things, such as offering to mind the children, assisting the person with insurance claims, etc. It's important to remember that people may need support from friends and family members for a considerable amount of time.

- **Be sensitive.**

If people have escaped with minimal damage to their property and without injury, it's not helpful to say: "Well, at least you still have your house/life/health." He/she has been through a distressing event and it may make the person feel worse to be singled out as "the lucky one" when friends and neighbours have suffered greater losses.

- **Choose your news.**

It can be tempting to obsess over news coverage, but too much exposure can be upsetting – particularly for teenagers and children. If the images are distressing the person, turn the TV off and do something else.

- **Talk it through.**

Try not to gloss over or downplay what happened and do not discourage the person from talking about what they have been through. Offer the person a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear. On the flip-side, it's also important not to press the person to remember or describe the event, or talk about feelings if he/she isn't ready. Sometimes, people say things that are meant to be helpful, but instead the comments just leave the person feeling more isolated and misunderstood. For example, it's not helpful to say: "You just need to get on with your life" or "I know how you feel."

- **Get help.**

If the symptoms are persisting or causing significant distress, encourage the person to seek extra support from others, such as chaplains, psychologists, social workers, support organisations and/or mental health organisations.

- **Keep it simple.**

Remember that providing support doesn't have to be complicated. It often involves simple gestures like spending time together, having a cup of tea, chatting about day-to-day life, enjoying a laugh together or a hug.

- **Take care of yourself.**

It can be very trying looking after someone else and sometimes, we forget to look after ourselves. Be aware of your own health – *physical* and *mental*. If you're feeling run down or stressed, talk to a doctor and seek support from others.

## **The silver lining**

It may help to know that the vast majority of people involved in a disaster recover by drawing on personal strengths and the love and support of family members, friends, neighbours and the wider community. Often, there can be positive outcomes despite the tragedy. Many people who have lived through a disaster develop new skills and view themselves and their families in a more positive light, place less importance on material possessions, develop closer bonds with their community and feel a sense of pride in their recovery.

## Who can help?

### In a mental health crisis, call:

|                                      |                      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Lifeline                             | <b>13 11 14</b>      |
| MensLine Australia                   | <b>1300 78 99 78</b> |
| Suicide Call Back Service (national) | <b>1300 659 467</b>  |
| Kids Help Line                       | <b>1800 55 1800</b>  |

## Mental health information and referral

### Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

[www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)

Information on coping with trauma, including fact sheets and advice for adults, children and parents on taking care of yourself after a disaster

### Australian Psychological Society

**1800 333 497**

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

Find a *psychologist* service and a wide range of information resources

### *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*

To find out more about depression, anxiety and related disorders call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636 (1300 bb info)** or visit the website at [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com)

If you speak a language other than English and require an interpreter, ask the info line operator for assistance from the Telephone Interpreter Service. *beyondblue* fact sheets are available in 26 languages.

A **free** copy of an easy-to-read, informative, self-help book *Taking Care of Yourself and Your Family: A Resource Book for Good Mental Health* by Dr John Ashfield can be ordered by calling the info line or online from the *beyondblue* website.



## Help for mental health problems under Medicare

You may be eligible for a Medicare rebate for 12 individual consultations with a psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist in mental health if you have been referred by a General Practitioner, psychiatrist or paediatrician. To find out more, see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 24 – Help for depression under Medicare** which can be downloaded from the *beyondblue* website or ordered from the *beyondblue* info line.

## Headspace

[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)

Information on mental illness for young people

## KidsMatter

[www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)

Information for parents and teachers to support children's mental health and well-being

## Reach Out

[www.reachout.com.au](http://www.reachout.com.au)

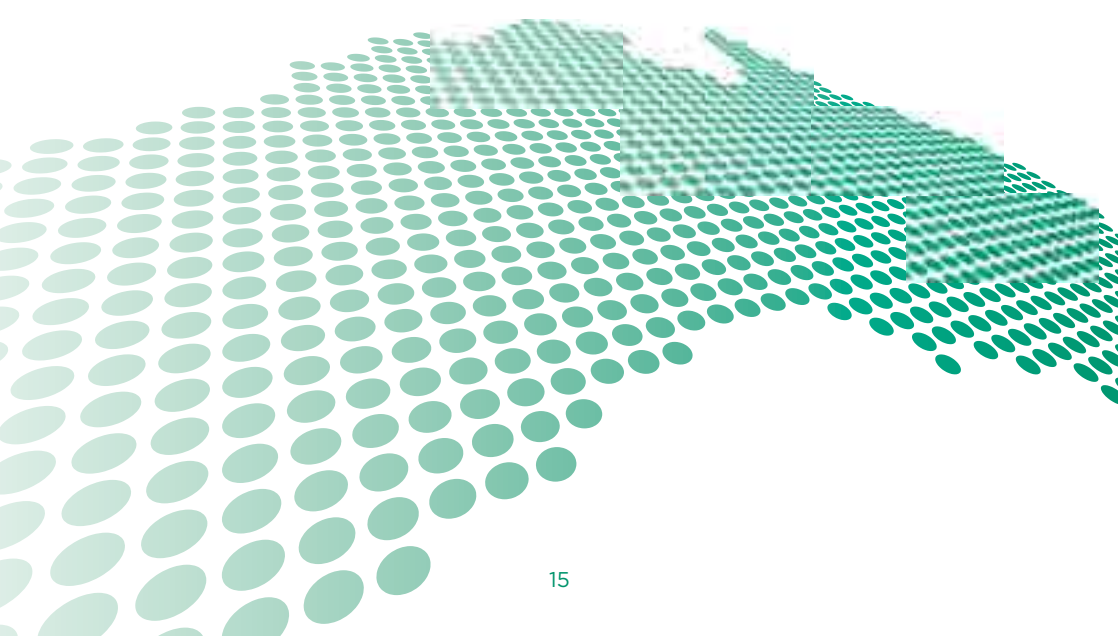
Wide range of information to help young people through tough times

## Relationships Australia

**1300 364 277**

[www.relationships.com.au](http://www.relationships.com.au)

Non-profit community-based organisation providing professional services to support relationships



## Help for people who are bereaved

### The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

**1800 642 066**

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

### **1300 664 786 – Bereavement Information and Referral Service**

Not-for-profit organisation which provides bereavement counselling and support programs, information and referral assistance to members of the general public

### The Compassionate Friends

**1800 641 091**

[www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au](http://www.compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au)

24-hour telephone information, referral and service for parents who have lost a child, or people who have lost a brother or sister

### GriefLink

[www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

Web-based information on grief and loss for the community and professionals

## Disaster recovery services

### Australian Government Disaster Assistance Website

[www.disasterassist.gov.au](http://www.disasterassist.gov.au)

Information about Federal Government services available after disasters – this site is updated regularly and lists all major incidents.

### Red Cross

Red Cross has a range of practical information, which may be useful after an emergency, including resources for children. Visit [www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au) or call the Red Cross office in your state.

When a disaster occurs, governments will often establish a help line. Listen to the radio or visit your state government website for more information.



## WORKSHEET

# CHOOSING AND PLANNING ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES

After a disaster, people often stop doing things that used to be enjoyable, rewarding or personally meaningful. It's hard to remember to take time for yourself, but taking the time to engage in pleasant activities is important.

There are so many tasks people must carry out following a disaster. Trying to take care of all the details while you may be coping with difficult feelings can quickly drain your emotional and physical energy. By taking care of yourself, eventually you will not only feel better, you will be able to do all of those day-to-day things that must be done.

Some activities to consider:

| Indoor activities                  | Outdoor activities | Social activities                               | Rebuilding activities                                 |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|
| Reading                            | Going for a walk   | Calling a friend                                | Fixing up a park, playground                          |
| Drawing/painting                   | Playing a sport    | Lunch with a friend                             | Doing something as a tribute to disaster victims etc. |
| Listening to music                 | Visiting a park    | Contacting family                               | Cleaning a neighbour's yard                           |
| Watching a movie                   | Walking a dog      | Meeting new people                              | Helping in a fundraiser                               |
| Writing in a journal               | Gardening          | Learning a new hobby                            | Minding a friend's children                           |
| Computer time<br>(games, internet) | Swimming           | Emailing, texting, blogging,<br>chatting online | Helping to repair a<br>community building             |

This list is intended to give you ideas about things that you might enjoy doing. You do not need to stick to the things on the list. Take some time to pick some activities you want to try or consider a few that are not included on this list. It's helpful to pick at least one activity you can do by yourself and one social activity that involves someone else. Think about activities that you have enjoyed or found meaningful in the past.

### Step 1: Review the activity list.

Create a list of at least five activities that you want to try.

Think about some of the things that worked in the past to make you feel better.

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## Step 2: Pick an activity to do.

You may pick more than one, but at least pick one. Find a day and a time when you can engage in this activity over the next week. Write it in on the calendar below.

| Mon | Tues | Wed | Thurs | Fri | Sat | Sun |
|-----|------|-----|-------|-----|-----|-----|
|     |      |     |       |     |     |     |

## Step 3: Make a plan.

Take a few minutes to think about what you need to do to make sure that you will be able to do the activity that you have chosen. Review the questions below and make them part of your plan.

Do you want or need to ask someone to do this activity with you?

Do you need anything to help you do this activity (e.g. sports equipment)?

How will you handle any feelings you might have that may make it difficult for you to engage in the activity? (Some of these feelings might include grief or loss, lack of energy, or guilt about doing an enjoyable activity when there are other important tasks you need to complete.)

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## WORKSHEET

# PROBLEM SOLVING

This worksheet will help you to break down problems into more manageable pieces, help you to prioritise problems and decide the best action to take.

## 1. Define the problem

*What is the problem I want to work on first?*

If you need to narrow down which problem to focus on first, it can help to ask yourself:

*Which problem is really bothering me the most? Is there one that I really need to deal with sooner than the others?*

*Is there one that is getting worse? Is there a problem that I feel most comfortable working on first?*

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Take a minute to ask yourself these questions about the problem:

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>a.</b> Is it happening to me/Is it between me and someone else? | yes / no |
| <b>b.</b> Is it happening to someone else?                         | yes / no |
| <b>c.</b> Is it happening between two or more other people?        | yes / no |

(If you circled 'yes' to **a**, this is likely to be a good problem for you to work on.

If you circled 'yes' to **b** or **c**, this may not be a problem that you can fix.

This may be a situation for someone else to work on.)

## 2. Set the goal

*What do I hope to see happen if the problem gets resolved?*

*What would a successful outcome to this problem look like to me?*

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Sometimes, a problem can be too big to tackle all at once. Ask yourself:

*What pieces or steps could I break the problem into to make it more manageable?*

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### 3. Brainstorming

*What are some possible solutions to the problem? (Don't judge your ideas. Write down any solution that comes to mind, even those solutions that may not have worked in the past or that sound unrealistic).*

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### 4. Evaluate and choose the best solutions

*What are the best solutions from the list above? It may be helpful to ask the opinion of someone you trust.*

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### 5. Make it happen

Which action steps will I commit to in the next several days?

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# THINGS TO REMEMBER

The impact of a disaster can be very distressing for a lot of people – even those who were not directly affected. There is a range of feelings you may be experiencing that are common reactions to an extraordinary situation.

You are not alone. Many people are in a similar position right now and many others have been through it in the past. Remember, this is not your fault and what happened was beyond your control.

If, after reading this booklet, you feel your emotional reaction is beyond what would normally be expected given the circumstances, it's vital to seek advice from your doctor or a mental health professional.

## USEFUL STRATEGIES THAT HELP MY HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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After reading this booklet, you may find it useful to write down three or four strategies you would like to remember when things get tough.



## Other important numbers



**[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) • info line 1300 22 4636**

Information about depression, anxiety and related disorders, effective treatments and how to help someone

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**[www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)**

Not-for-profit organisation undertaking research, policy advice, service development and education to improve outcomes for people affected by trauma

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**Australian  
Red Cross**

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**[www.redcross.org.au](http://www.redcross.org.au)**

Red Cross is a humanitarian organisation that helps people and their communities prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.

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australian centre  
for **grief** and  
**bereavement**

**[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au) • 1800 642 066**

**1300 664 786 – Bereavement Information and Referral Service**

Not-for-profit organisation which provides bereavement counselling and support programs, information and referral assistance to members of the general public



USEFUL STRATEGIES THAT HELP MY HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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TEAR-OFF WALLET CARD



*beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**  
Lifeline **13 11 14**  
MensLine Australia **1300 87 99 78**  
Kids Help Line **1800 551 800**  
Relationships Australia **1300 364 277**  
Rural Women's Telephone  
Counselling Service **1800 182 098**  
Women's Information Service **1800 188 158**  
Suicide Call Back Service **1300 659 467**

TEAR-OFF WALLET CARD (reverse side)