# Coping after emergencies and disasters

## Information for all staff

Immediately after a natural disaster, and during recovery efforts, it is common to experience some symptoms of psychological distress. With the support of colleagues, family and friends, most people will recover emotionally without the need for professional assistance. However, some people may be at risk of developing mental health problems without professional assistance. While some may benefit from psychological support almost immediately after a trauma such as a natural disaster, others may need to seek assistance weeks or even months afterwards.

During the disaster recovery stage, higher levels of conflict between staff, friends and neighbours may occur. In schools and Department of Education corporate offices, staff may be in contact with parents and students who may also have been affected. Some schools and departmental workplaces may face a greater than usual workload as a result of damaged buildings and resources. Consequently there is potential for higher levels of community conflict and fatigue. This, in addition to a heightened level of stress experienced by those who are more vulnerable to mental health issues, suggest that we need to monitor our own mental health and wellbeing, as well as that of our colleagues and others in the community.

## Symptoms that people may experience after a natural disaster

* Behaviours such as irritability, wanting to be alone or feeling less interest in activities.
* Physical reactions such as sleeping problems, feeling on edge/tense, general aches, pains, or upset stomach.
* Emotions such as grief, distress, shock, anger, anxiety and sadness.
* Cognitive reactions such as intruding unpleasant memories, and difficulty concentrating or making decisions.

For most people, these reactions are mild and disappear over days or weeks.

## Self-care and care of others

Regaining a sense of control is important after experiencing a natural disaster. Some of the things you can do to look after yourself (or others) include:

* Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event, and that you may have an emotional response.
* Ensure you eat well, have adequate rest, and exercise regularly.
* Make time for relaxation such as a warm bath or listening to music – whatever normally works for you.
* Try to resume a normal routine, but don’t over-exert yourself to avoid unpleasant memories.
* Seek support from friends or family, and spend time with them. You might like to talk about feelings, but you don’t have to. Sometimes you might like to be alone, but make sure you don’t isolate yourself.
* Try to minimise caffeine in food and drinks, and avoid using alcohol or drugs to block out painful feelings.

## Further assistance

For some people, self care activities may not be enough. Their reactions are more problematic, and they may require professional assistance. Fortunately, help is available for those who need support both within the department and from other organisations.

Staff and immediate family members affected by natural disasters can access free, short-term, confidential counselling support through the department’s [Employee Assistance Program.](https://intranet.qed.qld.gov.au/Services/HumanResources/payrollhr/healthwellbeing/staffwellbeing/Pages/employeeassistanceprogram.aspx) (EAP)

Principals, managers or supervisors wanting advice on how to assist staff in coping with the emotional aftermath of a natural disaster can call the department’s EAP Manager Hotline on 1800 604 640 for free, confidential consultations with senior clinical advisors.

Visit the Queensland Government [Recovery after a Disaster](https://www.qld.gov.au/community/disasters-emergencies/recovery-after-disaster) site for more detailed information about topics such as insurance, support, cleaning up or volunteering.