

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA THROUGH DISASTER RECOVERY

QUICK FACTS

Devastating natural disasters have had a profound traumatic effect on many Australians. Finding support can help as you work through trauma recovery.

- Disaster trauma is an understandable response to a devastating experience. You've lived through an extraordinary event, one that many people can't begin to understand. The trauma doesn't necessarily end once the events are over. You might still be living with their impact.
- [Traumatic experiences](#) are characterised by the distress they cause. They don't even need to have happened to you – we can be traumatised by witnessing something happen to someone else¹. And if you're living with an existing mental health issues, you might feel even more distressed, or experience worsening symptoms².
- Understanding how you're feeling can help on your journey to recovery.

WHAT CAN TRAUMA AFTER A DISASTER FEEL LIKE?

Everyone responds differently. The effects of trauma might be obvious from the first day, or take months to reveal itself. All the ways you feel are valid.

It's normal for feelings to fluctuate as you work through disaster recovery. Even day to day, you may have highs and lows. Mood swings, the sensation of reliving the experience and fear of the future are all common feelings after a disaster³.

WHY DOES THIS FEEL SO HARD?

It *is* hard, and it's healthy to acknowledge that! Trauma after a natural disaster is complex. It's not only influenced by living through the events, but by their ongoing impact upon various aspects of your personal life and community.

You might have also been affected by:

- **Displacement**
Being evacuated or forced to live away after disaster can have a serious impact on mental health, especially if you're still waiting to come home or won't be able to return.

- **Loss**
Natural disasters can cause devastating loss of life. Knowing someone who died or was seriously injured can compound the traumatic feelings, even if you didn't know them well.
- **Uncertainty**
Being unsure about the future can make it hard to feel safe and secure. When support is hard to find, it can reinforce traumatic feelings of being left behind or abandoned.
- **Insecurity**
Whole livelihoods can disappear and take time to return. Financial precarity and job loss can have a serious long-term impact on mental health.
- **Wide-spread trauma**
Unlike many traumatic events, natural disasters often affect whole communities of people. While you're learning to cope with your own difficult feelings, you may also be responsible for or affected by the response of family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues.

HOW DO I IDENTIFY MY TRIGGERS?

A 'trigger' is something that sparks a memory of the traumatic event that can lead to distressing sensations, emotions, thoughts, and further memories of the event. Triggers can be internal, like memories or physical sensations that remind you of the traumatic event, or they can be external, like returning to the place where it happened or approaching the anniversary date of the event .

Triggers can be hard to avoid, especially if you're still living in an area that has been affected by a crisis or natural disaster. This can mean that the distress associated with your triggers are also hard to avoid. Sensations, thoughts, emotions and memories linked to the traumatic event can feel intrusive and unpredictable.

Identifying your unique triggers can help to prepare for the challenging experiences they bring up. Pick a time when you're feeling calm and safe to create a list of your triggers. You might decide to do this with the support of a trusted friend, family member or health professional, taking breaks if it becomes too upsetting. Consider, for example:

- What thoughts might you have?
- How do they feel in your body?
- Where do you feel unsafe?
- What emotions are you having?

Once you have an understanding of your triggers, the next step is to develop strategies that will help you prepare to better cope with the issues these triggers might raise for you in the moment.

HOW CAN I MANAGE MY TRIGGER RESPONSES?

Managing the distress caused by triggers takes practice, so it can help to create a clear plan before you need it. Start with an affirmation about how you will cope. For example, "I will try

to sit with this feeling, knowing that even though it is uncomfortable, it will pass.”

When you feel the distress rising:

- recognise the emotion or physical sensation
- allow yourself to feel the sensation, remembering your plan
- use grounding techniques like describing your surroundings, observing the emotion or focusing on a different task
- [breathe calmly and deeply](#)
- when the sensation passes – and it will – seek support if required

How can I prepare for anniversaries of traumatic events?

Some dates will feel significant for years to come. As the anniversary of a natural disaster looms, it's completely normal to feel apprehensive or worried. Even with a healthy approach to disaster recovery, this can be a really hard time. Being aware of how you might feel can help you to recognise when you might need additional mental health support.

- Plan your day – try to keep up your routine to stay grounded, arrange to meet up or connect with loved ones, or take time to reflect with the support of others and your trigger plan
- Remember to engage with good [self-care techniques](#)
- Have support on standby – your GP, psychologist, friends, family
- Have a [safety strategy](#) – if you feel unsafe or are having a hard time coping, how will you seek help?
- Be kind to yourself – this is a hard day and you're doing your best

HOW DO I TAKE CARE OF MYSELF?

As well as planning practical ways to cope, you might already have helpful techniques you've learned for managing existing mental health issues. Stay in touch with your doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist and maintain proper ongoing mental health care.

You might like to explore [SANE's guide to self-care during disaster recovery](#).

FINDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If you're concerned about how you're feeling, speak to your existing mental health professional, or contact SANE's free counselling service on [1800 18 7263](tel:1800187263) for information, advice and referral. You can also connect with others who have experienced a natural disaster and understand what you're going through via our [online, moderated, anonymous forums](#).

REFERENCES

1. E.g.

<https://books.google.com.au/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Syw9NrPc5R8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&ots=7e1>

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https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10805-019-09348-y](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10805-019-09348-y)

2. E.g. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4168808/>
3. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/coping-after-disaster-trauma>
4. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181836/>
5. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/13844895_The_Body_Keeps_the_Score_Memory_and_the_Evolving_Psychobiology_of_Posttraumatic_Stress
6. <https://econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/10.1027/0044-3409/a000021>