

Coping personally – general information for communities

Distress is an understandable and normal response to major disasters. Common causes of distress may be related to having been directly at risk from the floods, being concerned about family and friends who may be affected, witnessing injuries and distress to others, or being caught up in the panic and confusion that often follows. In addition, feelings and memories related to previous experiences of disasters or other grief and loss may also resurface. Most people experience acute stress during emergency events and most manage with courage and strength. However, sometimes it is only later when the distressing images are recalled that some of the stressful effects start to show. While most people will manage with the support of family and friends, there are times when extra help and support may be needed. Those who have lost loved ones, have been seriously injured, or are highly distressed by the floods, will often need particular support and care. Our communities have a history of coping with uncertain and troubled times with courage and strength.

There are three important things you need to know:

- normal reactions to this type of emergency
- positive ways of coping
- when to get extra help.

Normal reactions to a disaster like this include:

- shock and numbness, often fear at first
- horror and grief when the extent of loss is realised
- frustration, anger, helplessness and even sometimes despair when it all seems too much
- sometimes fears or old worries may resurface.

These feelings usually settle over the early weeks.

Positive ways of coping may be:

- supporting one another, especially in the family and in your community
- providing emotional support – comforting each other
- carrying out practical tasks – tackling the jobs that need to be done a bit at a time and counting each success
- sharing your experience and feelings with others - a bit at a time when it is right for you
- looking after your own and your family's general health – rest, exercise, food and company all help (being careful not to drink too much alcohol).

When to ask for extra help

Sometimes post disaster stress can be ongoing and affect your physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It's time to ask for help if:

- your sleep is badly affected
- you feel very distressed, irritable, on edge or agitated much of the time
- you feel hopeless, despairing, miserable or that you can't go on
- you have trouble concentrating, are distracted and cannot do your usual tasks
- you feel your health is not so good
- you have recurrent nightmares or intrusive thoughts about the emergency
- you have new symptoms or old problems may seem to have returned, eg. breathing, heart and stomach problems.
- For children, withdrawal, aggressive behaviours, difficulties at school, problems separating from parents or going to sleep may indicate the need for help.

New Zealand Government