

COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEWSLETTER SPECIAL EDITION

Information, advice and support to help you recover from emergencies

Message from Craig Lapsley – Emergency Services Commissioner at the Cobden Community meeting on April 3rd

Your health and wellbeing is important. You need to look after each other. Lions Club, Blaze Aid, CFA – all agencies, we're all here with you, but you have homework! Promise yourself that you will look after yourself and your neighbour. The boys in the room are the ones with the hardest job to do. Commit to looking after each other to take the pressure off the family. Stop there and think about the kids – listen to them, they have stories to tell.

The strength is with all of us if we do it right!

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 wellbeing. 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 experienced following a major traumatic event include:

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- feeling numb, detached or withdrawn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

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 once back at work, it's important to discuss it straight away with a General Practitioner (GP) or mental health professional.

Your own coping style is likely to have an influence on how your child or teenager responds to a traumatic event.

Tips for talking to children after an emergency:

It's also important to talk to your children if they have been exposed to emergencies – either first hand or through the media.

- if your children have been personally involved in an emergency, check with them to see how they are going. You can help them by reassuring them of their safety
- encourage your child to talk about their feelings, thoughts and concerns. Don't dismiss their issues as trivial – this can create a belief that the events were too awful to talk about
- try to minimise the distressing images or verbal media reports your children see. If your children are watching or listening to reports of emergencies, be with them to help them make sense of the situation – they need your perspective, guidance and reassurance
- be aware of what your child is being exposed to at school, both in the playground and the classroom or outside school in social networking internet sites, chat rooms, email or with text messaging, these are powerful instant communications tools for young people
- acknowledge concerns that are real and correct any misconceptions
- if you have any concerns talk to your doctor, or seek a referral to an experienced psychologist.

Where to get help

- Your doctor or local community health centre
- A counsellor or psychologist
- Lifeline: **13 11 14**
- Beyond Blue **1300 224 636**
- MensLine Australia **1300 789 978**
- Kids Helpline **1800 551 800**
- Safe steps Family Violence Response Centre: **1800 015 188**
- VicEmergency hotline: **1800 226 226**
- VicEmergency website: www.emergency.vic.gov.au
- <https://www.farmerhealth.org.au/page/health-centre/trauma-reaction-and-recovery>
- <https://services.dhhs.vic.gov.au/emergency-assistance>
- <https://www.redcross.org.au/recover>

For access to local emotional support services please call Warrnambool Community Health on **(03) 5563 4000** or Colac Area Health on **(03) 5232 5180**. They are offering free, confidential and professional support to individuals or families who have been impacted by the recent fires regardless of where you are located.

No General Practitioner referrals are required. Website: <http://www.southwesthealthcare.com.au>

Support for CFA people and families:

Peer Support Program – Contact your local Peer Coordinator
Member Assistance Program 1300 795 711
Wellbeing Intake Line 9262 8409

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF A 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.

- **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 your feelings.**

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. There are many other ways to express your feelings that you may find helpful, such as drawing, painting, playing music, making collages etc.

- **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

<https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/e5dd400b-d18c-4e6f-ae9c-fbe55b25a6f4/LookingAfterYourselfandYourFamilyAfterDisaster.pdf.aspx>