

Building Community Resilience During and After Natural Disasters

Disasters may be out of our hands, but how we prepare, respond and recover, we do have some say in. It can be common after a disaster to feel overwhelmed and deeply distressed. You may also feel lonely and isolated for some time once the crisis has subsided.

What makes a resilient community?

No matter how prepared you are, you cannot stop the impact of natural disasters. However, preparing for the aftermath helps reduce the impact of the disaster and helps communities recover more quickly. When people talk about resilience to disasters, this is usually what they mean. How can we prepare ourselves, our families, and our communities to cope with the impacts of natural disasters?

Relationships Australia NSW has been supporting communities to recover from bushfires and recent floods through their [Disaster Resilience Project](#). As these extreme events become more frequent and unpredictable, these are some key learnings that Relationships Australia NSW has shared, which will help everyone impacted to look after themselves and each other.

- 1. Identify what you can control and focus your energy there** – there are many things you cannot control in the aftermath of disaster. Finding something that you can control is really important. You can control how you look after yourself, your thoughts and your actions. Try to spend some of your time doing something that gives you a sense of achievement. Reconnect with hobbies, go for a walk, volunteer, cook something, invite a neighbour to join you. Connect with those around you.
- 2. Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings** – we think and feel things without realising, which can lead us to have a mess of thoughts that leave us feeling out of control. Recognising and acknowledging how you are feeling can help you build awareness. Focus on the present moment and try to interrupt your thoughts if you find them wandering to worries about the future. Sometimes this is referred to as mindfulness. For more mindfulness tips, read [Relationships Australia Western Australia's tip sheet](#).
- 3. Have a routine and stick to it** – routines reduce unpredictability and help you focus on the here and now. Try keeping a routine around sleeping and waking times, healthy eating, and regular appointments.

- 4. Ask yourself: “What am I not doing that I used to?”** – is there anything you stopped during the crisis that you haven’t picked back up? It’s really important to still find pleasure in the world and value the activities that bring you a sense of joy. Make sure you mark out down time to switch off from work or disaster clean-up. Consider switching off from technology.
- 5. Connect with others** – recovery doesn’t happen alone. Many communities will band together during the crisis and support one another to recover physically from the disaster. But maintaining these connections to your community is integral to your psychological and emotional recovery, which often takes longer. Explore Neighbours Every Day’s range of resources to help you connect with your community and make sure you maintain those connections, in the tough times and the good times.
- 6. Take your time** – don’t rush the recovery. In the wake of a disaster, we may want to move forward as fast as we can. But this can lead to overcommitting ourselves and rushing decisions. A fast recovery is not the same as a good recovery. Just because everyone else is moving forward, doesn’t mean that you might need more time. Don’t rush decisions, remember that emotions are normal and take breaks when you need to.
- 7. Look after yourself by managing your stress** – it’s very easy to be stuck in the problem. As well as looking after your physical health through healthy eating and exercise, try to look at what the future might hold and focus on hope. We can’t stop disasters from happening, but we can choose how we respond to whatever comes our way.
- 8. Get help when you need it** – recovery from disaster can take a long time and it is easy to feel overwhelmed and exhausted. It is important to reach out for help when you need it. For more information on our services and how they can support you, or to find your nearest centre visit relationships.org.au

“Resilient communities work together to soften [the impact of disaster]. Differences are put aside, and everybody helps each other as best they can. With support, you can survive just about anything.”

– Shane, Flood Survivor, Natural Disaster Resilience Leader

This tip sheet was created using insights from a longer video developed by Relationships Australia NSW. You can [watch it here](#).

If you need more immediate assistance, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or SMS Lifeline Crisis Text Service 0477 13 11 14.