



Support through a natural disaster

Australia is no stranger to natural disasters, e.g. bushfires, droughts, cyclones and floods. These events impact entire communities, including organisations, their employees and families. The disruption to daily life can be significant. People may be forced to evacuate their homes and workplaces, and leave cherished possessions behind as they turn their focus to survival. It is common to experience a range of intense emotions following a traumatic event like a natural disaster. The immediate loss of control and personal safety is frightening, can lead to severe and acute shock, distress, and anxiety. People who have faced potential loss, injury, or even death, from natural disasters will experience a range of feelings immediately, weeks and even months later. The memories and associated fear that a similar event will reoccur can be long lasting. As a manager, there are a few things you can do to support your employees:

1. **Normalise reactions:** Accept that people will experience a range of emotions and that it is normal. Once the event is over it doesn't mean people's feelings go away. Acknowledge their feelings and reassure people that their intense feelings are normal given the disaster.
2. **Try to keep calm and lift spirits through community involvement:** Provide reassurance that "we will get through this together" and focus on the things that were managed well, e.g. the brave responses of emergency services. People feel united in the shared experience and can support and comfort each other. This connecting and helping is critical to coping.
3. **Ask how you can help:** Ask if there's anything that you can do to assist employees or if there is anything they need? e.g. flexible hours, transport or belongings.
4. **Do not catastrophise:** It is common to reflect on the "what ifs" or "what might have been" Do not speculate on how much worse it could have been. Avoid comparison of stories as each person has a right to their feelings.
5. **Encourage people to talk about their experience** because keeping it inside isn't helpful - avoid reassurances such as "it could have been worse". It's common for people to want to escape their reality, they may deny or withdraw. They may need to delay their emotional response while they focus on survival or practical things so do check in regularly and gently.
6. **Avoid probing questions:** Curiosity is part of human nature. Asking people for the details of a traumatic experience may bring it back or trigger other emotions, wait until they are ready to share their story.
7. **Encourage a familiar routine:** Routine and normal day to day activities provide a sense of control and security, which is reassuring when a natural disaster has a significant effect on their lives.
8. **Returning to work:** Having a sense of purpose and connection is essential to recovery and often work provides this, offer options such as flexible hours. The recovery process takes time, and there are often ups and downs so plan for people to have setbacks. Each individual will be different and recover at their own pace.

Remind staff about their confidential EAP service. As a manager there is only so much you can do to support people, so make sure they have other supports in place too.

For further guidance call our **Manager Support Hotline on 1800 650 204.**

