



Recovering from floods

Promoting safety, comfort, and help after a flood

When a flood happens in a community, it can be highly distressing for many people, but there is a lot that family, friends, volunteers and community members can do to help those affected.

Coping with the impacts of floods

Following floods, many people's way of thinking about the world and themselves may have shifted. This is understandable given how distressing a disaster can be; however, it can also lead to feelings of helplessness, sadness, fear, or anger. This information sheet outlines some of the many ways you can support yourself or seek help from others to help you recover from the impacts of floods.

Tackling unhelpful thinking

A useful skill to learn is to notice if you are thinking in an unhelpful way, and try to find more helpful thoughts that make it easier to manage.

Catching yourself thinking unhelpful thoughts can be difficult. Often negative thinking becomes automatic, and we don't notice what we're saying to ourselves, but just know we feel bad. Noticing that you are feeling worried might come first. Then, ask yourself what you might have been thinking. Perhaps it was something like "Everything is ruined – I'll never get things sorted out".

The next step is to come up with an alternative and more helpful thought, which should give rise to more positive feelings like being in control and feeling more hopeful. Try, "I've coped with a lot already and discovered strengths I didn't realise I had", or, "This is hard work and will take a while, but I've started – just keep chipping away".

Of course, as with most things, with practice you will get better at noticing unhelpful thoughts and focusing on helpful alternatives with practice. And the good thing about negative thinking? There are always plenty of opportunities to practice! If you're finding getting started difficult, it may be helpful to seek assistance from a [psychologist](#).

Problem solving

Working on some basic coping skills can enhance recovery and help tackle stressful situations. One very useful skill is problem solving.

Four steps to problem solving

1. Identify the problem

First, try to identify what the problem really is. Is this your problem, or does it belong with someone else? Is this a problem you can do something about? If not, try to put it aside and choose one that you can do something about. And if you're feeling overloaded with all sorts of unfinished tasks, give yourself permission to let some problems wait until later.

2. Assess the problem

If the problem is big, break it into manageable parts. For example, if you're needing to clean up your block, perhaps you can break it down into house site, shedding, and the rest of your property. Then decide what you're aiming for based on the priorities, like 'The site needs to be safe', or 'We have to see what we can salvage so we know what else we need to buy', or 'We need a break before we get on with cleaning this mess'.

3. Brainstorm solutions

Next, think up as many ways of achieving your goals as you can. For example, hiring temporary fencing to keep children out of the rubble, organising a working bee, accessing a government-funded service, or going away for a short break. Write down as many creative ideas as possible – a range of ideas can help at this stage!

4. Adopt a solution

The final step is to sort through the options with those close to you, or perhaps with a case manager, and choose several that best meet your goals. These may be based either on the priority of the goal or the ease with which it can be achieved. Then work out what you need to do to give them a go. Also, don't forget that help is available from counsellors and others at the recovery centres.

The importance of social connections

One of the best things we can do for ourselves following a distressing experience is to spend time with people who care about us, and to feel the social support of friends, family and the community. It is not uncommon, though, for people's social support networks to be disrupted following a flood disaster. People may feel too busy sorting things out, the places they used to gather may have been destroyed, or group activities discontinued.

Whatever the reasons for a decrease in social contact with others, we know very well that rebuilding social connections after a disaster is incredibly important. People need people. They help give us a sense of belonging, a feeling of being loved and cared for and that we're not alone, and reassurance that our reactions are normal. They can share burdens, provide practical support like helping replant gardens and caring for children. They can provide a sympathetic ear when we need to talk, or sensible advice when we're struggling with a problem. They can show us that we are important to them, too.

Rebuilding connections

Reconnecting can be hard, but worthwhile. Sometimes starting off with a small contact, like having a cup of tea together, is an easier way to begin. Remember to have patience with those with whom you are in contact as they may be as distracted as you. Making contact over the phone with friends who no longer live nearby may suit you. Perhaps you could make a time to catch up with a friend who is a good listener.

Even though you might be feeling exhausted, giving social and practical support to your friends and neighbours might help you to feel you have a sense of purpose, and increase your motivation and energy.

Existing community support groups are useful to make social connections with others. Often, community recovery groups and activities are established after a disaster to help bring people together. The networks we have within our communities, and our relationships with people, create a sense of belonging and identity which help with recovery.

Taking time for pleasurable activities

Months after a flood, many people are feeling exhausted and stressed, and they know that their daily struggle isn't going to be over any time soon. Disasters often disrupt routines or activities that have given people a sense of control and pleasure in the past, and people often don't make as much time as they used to for fun things.

Doing what you enjoy is good for you

Engaging in activities that are enjoyable is a very important way of gaining a sense of control, balance, meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, one of the most successful ways of improving people's mood and restoring a sense of control, is to increase their activity and increase the number of positive events into their routine. When life is unbalanced by a disaster, finding a new balance between work, getting life back on track and pleasure is very important.

Pleasurable activities are essential for our health, and provide opportunities to connect with other people. Reintroducing pleasurable activities following the chaos that results after a flood is important, as it provides evidence that life is not entirely negative. So, take some time out and give yourself permission to do some of the things you enjoyed in the past. Planning ahead so that you've got things to look forward to is useful, as is making sure that some of the pleasurable activities involve social connections with others. Sometimes it can be easier to talk and share with people when you are busy doing something together.

As you start picking up some of the activities you used to enjoy before the floods, you may find that you're not enjoying them as much as you used to. This is very normal, and not a reason to give up. Sometimes after very traumatic experiences people's ability to enjoy themselves is diminished for the present. It can and will come back, and one important way in which you can help is by doing things that help to rebuild some normal routines and a sense of wellbeing. And when you 'down tools' for a while and take time out for a bit of fun, you will probably pick up again when you're a little more rested, and you may even find that you make quicker progress with all of those jobs.

General tips to help you recover from a flood

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it.
- Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Remind yourself that you can and are coping.
- Spend time with people who are predictable, familiar, and respectful.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually facing what has happened can assist you to come to terms with a traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings – share your experiences with people you trust when opportunities arise. But don't feel pressured if you don't want to talk now – this is also OK.
- Find other ways to express your feelings, e.g. through a diary or art work.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Structure your day and try to have a balance between being busy and productive and allowing time to reflect and process your feelings and thoughts.
- Allow yourself time to rest if you are feeling tired. Regular exercise is also important.
- Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity or listening to music. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and whom you trust. Social support is enormously helpful in times of crisis.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or want a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- If your recent experience stirs up other memories or feelings from a past unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood trauma, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the experiences separate and deal with them separately.
- Keep reminding yourself that things will get better, and you do have the ability to manage.
- Give yourself time to adjust. Resilience is the norm, but it can take a while to bounce back.

Seek additional support when needed

If you feel that the stress or anxiety you or your family are experiencing as a result of a flood is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help.



If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

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The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians during disasters. Visit www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters

