



Communicating about natural disaster

Natural disasters such as floods, fires and cyclones can have a serious impact on communities, including loss of life, employment and housing. These events can also lead to poor mental health and increased alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, as well as an increased risk of suicide.

The way we communicate about natural disasters, and their impacts, is important. When done well, communication can encourage intervention before people reach a crisis point.

This resource provides some practical tips on how to communicate safely and effectively in the aftermath of natural disasters.



**Black Dog
Institute**



Mindframe

This resource has been developed by Everymind, under the Mindframe initiative, in partnership with Black Dog Institute and the National Suicide Prevention Trial Sites.



1. Help others to recognise the warning signs for poor mental health

When communicating about natural disasters, include information about the warning signs of poor mental health, suicide risk and increased AOD use that we can look out for in ourselves and others. Some of these signs can include:

- Signs of poor mental health, suicide risk and increased AOD use
- Feeling sad or distressed
- Excessive fears or worries
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant tiredness, low energy or trouble sleeping
- Major changes in eating habits

2. Encourage help-seeking and avoid trivialising people's experiences

Remember that people experience grief and recovery differently. Making comparisons between people's reactions (e.g. "Everyone else has already moved on", "You didn't lose as much as other people") can discourage people from seeking the support they require. Instead, encourage people to look out for their mental health and seek support, if they need it.

This might include promoting services related directly to mental health, suicide and AOD use, including:

- Lifeline (13 11 14 or text 0477 13 11 14, 24/7)
- Beyond Blue (1300 224 636)

It can also be helpful to include resources related to natural disasters such as:

- Disaster Welfare Assistance Line (1800 018 444)
- GriefLine (1300 845 745)

For example:

'The loss of [housing/infrastructure/businesses/employment/life] that has occurred in the wake of [insert natural disaster] may be impacting the mental health of people in our community. We encourage people to take care of themselves. Support services are available and we'd encourage those impacted to contact [insert service name], a local service that does [insert purpose].'

3. Acknowledge grief and its impact

Acknowledge that people may be experiencing grief in the aftermath of a disaster, and that this may impact people's mental health. For example:

'We acknowledge that [insert group e.g. sporting club members] have been impacted by the [insert natural disaster]. We know our community is grappling with the loss of housing/infrastructure/businesses/employment/life at this time and that these factors may impact their mental health and wellbeing.'

4. Encourage use of digital resources where appropriate

For online communications, it may be useful to direct people to web-based resources including:

- **Life in Mind:** in collaboration with the National Mental Health Commission, Everymind has worked with the suicide prevention and mental health sectors to provide a comprehensive list of resources to support those affected by adverse and traumatic events including floods, bushfires and COVID-19.
- **Beyond Blue:** Beyond Blue have put together a resource regarding looking after your mental health following a disaster.

5. Check in regularly, including on significant dates such as anniversaries

The impacts of natural disasters often last for many months and years. It is important to continue checking in with your community over the months and years following a disaster. It may be useful to create a schedule, reminding yourself/your organisation to check in with community members at particular times, such as 1 month, 2 months, 3 months, 6 months and 12 months after a disaster. Anniversaries of disasters may also bring up intense emotions for the people who experienced those events, and are a good opportunity to check in with your community.