Factsheet

Emotional Preparedness
For cyclones and other disasters

Many people have started asking "What can I do to handle the emotional stress and worry that I or people around me might feel either in the lead up or in the days, weeks and months that follow a cyclone or natural disaster?

This brief guide provides some basic information and key contacts to have in your ESKiE (Emotional Support Kit in Emergency) for when you may need it.

One of the best ways we can help ourselves is by being prepared. This guide has some tips for individuals, couples, families, children, young and older people.

Knowing common reactions when under stress and preparing for them will help ourselves and others around us during the emergency to be able to understand our feelings, encourage more helpful thoughts and respond or plan in more helpful ways.

**Remember:**
- How we think and feel affects our behaviour.
- Everybody may THINK, FEEL and ACT differently in times of emergency.
- Preparing our thoughts and feelings for the cyclone season is very important.

**What feelings or emotional reactions can be expected in an emergency?**
- Anxiety/worry
- Fear
- Anger
- Excitement and Alertness
- Stress
- Frustration
- Panic

**How might my body react if it feels stressed in an emergency?**
- Feel short of breath
- Hot or Cold
- Tensing of muscles (e.g. jaw or shoulders)
- Quick heart rate
- Dizziness

**What unhelpful thoughts might I have if I am stressed in an emergency?**
- "This is the worse thing that has happened"
- "We are all going to die"
- "Everything is gone"
- "I don’t know what to do next"
- "I am responsible for everyone else”.

Three common ways people ACT in a stressful situation?
1. Freeze and be unable to do anything
2. Flee and avoid the situation - this is easier in the alert phase than during the event (FLIGHT)
3. Face the situation - sometimes calmly or sometimes aggressively (FIGHT).

**What might help?**
- Breathing exercises (watch the rise and fall of your stomach, rather than your shoulders)
- Thinking or talking of happy past events and trying to remember the details
- Talking or being with other people
- Dancing, moving, singing
- Being held or cuddled
- Listening to emergency radio channels
- Encouraging positive thinking
- Self-talk - identify an unhelpful thought or behaviour and tell yourself a more useful response.

**What might not be useful during the phases of a natural disaster?**
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
- Yelling and arguing when people are highly stressed
- Ordering people to undertake roles rather than negotiating with them
- Forcing people to talk about their experience if they don’t want to
- Watching or listening to news all the time - this may lead to overexposure to stories of the event.

**What thoughts and feelings might be expected after an emergency?**
Some disruption is to be expected after a significant emergency, so it is important to look out for each other to make sure everyone is managing along the way and to ensure that negative feelings, thoughts and behaviours do not go on for weeks at a time. Some things that may be experienced include:
- sleep difficulties
- memory difficulties
- bad dreams
- short fuse
- sadness
- needing to know where people are all the time.
- In addition, children may show signs such as clinginess to parents, or starting to do things or play with things that younger children do (regression).
When should I access further emotional assistance for myself or others?

Always seek assistance if you are concerned about the wellbeing of yourself or others around you.

If not addressed, concerns can continue to grow and impact on our enjoyment of and participation in life for a long time.

Here are some examples of when to ask for help from professionals skilled in managing reactions to stressful events for adults and/or children. Please note, this is not an exhaustive list.

- If worry and thoughts are overwhelming and distressing for yourself or others around you
- Remembering events over and over in your mind
- If thoughts and feelings get in the way of resuming and enjoying usual activities such as work, social events, caring for children, household tasks
- If there is uncontrollable crying or other signs of significant distress
- Repetitive behaviours
- Increase in risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol or drug use
- If people are isolated and stop communicating or engaging with others
- Ongoing thoughts that individual or loved ones will be harmed or may die
- Ongoing sleep difficulties (including getting to sleep or having nightmares) or eating difficulties
- Ongoing unusual behaviours
- Changes in relationships
- If you are concerned that they will hurt others or themselves
- Needing to know where others are at all times.

Natural disasters can trigger memories of other stressful times in our lives and lead to conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can be managed in conjunction with skilled clinicians.

Where can I get assistance and advice?

- Visiting or contacting your local Community Centre or Disaster Information Centre
- Visiting or contacting your local Health Service or Hospital
- Contacting your local Community Mental Health Service
- Calling 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84)
- Contacting your GP
- Calling Lifeline (13 11 14)
- Calling Red Cross
- Contacting Centrelink

What can go in my ESKiE (Emotion Support Kit in Emergency)?

Your Emotional Support Kit in an Emergency (ESKiE) can include things that will make you and or people around you feel better in an emergency situation and the clean-up period.

Include in your ESKiE your personal strengths and knowledge about relaxation and stress responses. If you need to get out quickly, think of your ESKiE as something that can’t get left behind.

Examples of what to include in an ESKiE are:

- contact lists
- phone cards for payphones
- ear plugs or an eye-mask
- essential oils and/or scented candles
- nail polish or other pamper activities
- board games and/or a deck of cards
- pen, paper and/or chalk for sketching, story/song writing, journaling and/or colouring in
- musical instruments and/or books
- solar lights and back-up batteries for non-essential items
- materials for craft activities (e.g. glue, collage material, paints)
- favourite music or DVDs (in case you have power)
- photos of happy memories
- basic sporting equipment such as balls, a cricket set or a frisbee.

Materials adapted from:
- Australian Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/help.html