

Coping personally after the tsunamis

Distress is an understandable and normal response to disasters such as tsunamis. Common causes of distress may be related to having been directly at risk from the disaster, being concerned about family and friends, witnessing injuries and distress to others, or being caught up in the panic and confusion that often follows. In addition, feelings and memories related to previous experiences of disasters or other grief and loss may also resurface.

Most people experience acute stress during events like the recent tsunamis and most manage with courage and strength. However, sometimes it is only later when the distressing images are recalled that some of the stressful effects start to show. While most people will manage with the support of family and friends, there are times when extra help and support may be needed.

Those who have lost loved ones, or have been seriously injured, will often need particular support and care.

There are three important things you need to know:

- normal reactions to this type of disaster
- positive ways of coping
- when to get extra help.

Normal reactions to a disaster like this include:

- shock and numbness, often fear at first
- horror and grief when the extent of loss is realised
- frustration, anger, helplessness and even sometimes despair when it all seems *too much*.

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These feelings usually settle over the early weeks.

Our communities have a history of coping with uncertain and troubled times with courage and strength.

Positive ways of coping may be:

- supporting one another especially in the family and in your community
- providing emotional support – comforting each other
- carrying out practical tasks – tackling the jobs that need to be done *a bit at a time* and counting each success
- sharing your experience and feelings with others a bit at a time when it *is right for you*
- looking after your own and your family's general health – rest, exercise, food and company all help (being careful not to drink too much alcohol).

Children

Many adults are particularly concerned about the effects of disasters on children, including the effects of exposure of children to distressing images.

Parents and carers can help by answering children's questions honestly, acknowledging concerns and fears and helping children understand how they are protected. Excessive exposure to shocking media images may be distressing, particularly to younger children. Parents and carers can help by limiting children's television viewing and avoiding repeated viewing of disaster scenes.

When to ask for extra help

Sometimes post disaster stress can be ongoing and affect your physical and mental health and wellbeing. It's time to ask for help if:

- your sleep is badly affected
- you feel very distressed, irritable, on edge or agitated much of the time
- you feel hopeless, despairing, miserable or that you *can't go on*
- you have trouble concentrating, are distracted and cannot do your usual tasks
- you feel your health is not so good
- you have new symptoms or old problems may seem to have returned, eg breathing, heart and stomach problems.

For children, withdrawal, aggressive behaviours, difficulties at school, problems separating from parents or going to sleep may indicate the need for help.

Seeking help

There are a number of ways of seeking help for distress related to the disaster.

- DFAT (the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) has established a national 24-hour **Emergency Call Unit** to provide information and advice to those affected, or to their relatives and friends. The unit's number is **1800 002 214**. Website <http://www.dfat.gov.au>
- Centrelink has established a national number to provide a range of support services to those affected, or to their relatives and friends. This number is **1800 057 111**. Website <http://www.centrelink.gov.au>
- The NSW Department of Community Services' **State Disaster Recovery Centre** is available to provide welfare support and assistance to those affected by the disaster. The centre's number is **(02) 8855 5111**.
- NSW Health has established a 24-hour **Tsunami Mental Health Support Line** which can be contacted by anyone concerned about how they or someone they are worried about is dealing with distress. This freecall number is **1800 201 123**. Staff at this number can directly link you with a translator if required.
- The **NSW Transcultural Mental Health Centre** is providing a Tsunami Disaster 24-hour Counselling Service for NESB Communities in 50 community languages, including Indonesian, Thai, Sinhalese, Tamil

and Hindi. Ring the freecall number **1800 648 911** or telephone **(02) 9840 3767**.

- In addition, your GP can be contacted, as they often are in the best position to assist with ongoing concerns.

What to do if you become sick

You may have been exposed to a number of infections while in a tsunami-affected area. These illnesses may occur within a few days, or, more rarely may take several weeks or months to appear.

It is recommended that you see your family doctor or general practitioner if you develop any of the symptoms listed below or other symptoms that concern you. Be sure to tell the doctor that you have been in a tsunami-affected area. If required, the doctor can get further advice from infectious diseases specialists or their local public health unit (phone numbers are listed in the White Pages under 'Health').

- Infection of any cuts or skin abrasions acquired while overseas.
- Diarrhoea – see a doctor immediately if you are unable to keep fluids down or have fever, bloody diarrhoea, or large amounts of watery diarrhoea.
- Vomiting, particularly if it occurs with fever.
- Chills or fever more than 37.5°C.
- Cough, shortness of breath, chest pain (especially if immersion in water occurred, or water spray exposure, eg helicopter evacuation).
- Sore, red eyes.
- Muscle aches and pains.
- Severe headache.
- Rash.
- Unexplained weight loss, loss of appetite.
- Jaundice (yellow discolouration of eyes and/or skin), dark urine or pale stools.

Make sure you are up to date with your tetanus immunisation, particularly if you have cuts or abrasions.

Malaria is common in Asia – if you are taking tablets against malaria make sure you complete your course of medication. **Note** that malaria tablets do not absolutely guarantee protection from malaria, even if you have taken your tablets as directed.

Information on infectious diseases can be located at <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/living/infect.html>