

# Coping through a natural disaster emergency

## mental health tips for you and your family

Having to flee your home, leave animals or possessions behind and relocating can cause distress, fear and anxiety for you and your loved ones. Remember that these are some of the most stressful events one can experience. Whether you are coping with fire, flood, earthquake or an other emergency dealing with your physical safety, here are some proven tips to help you cope with the mental stress of a natural disaster.

### Take care of the basics

Try to eat well and get enough sleep. Sleep and nutrition are more important than ever.

### Be kind to yourself

Set realistic expectations and be patient with yourself and others.

### Give and accept support

Expect to feel angry, sad, confused or just numb—and talk to others about it.



### Get back to your daily routine

Doing things as simple as brushing your teeth can help restore a sense of safety and control.



### Take a break

Take breaks from disaster news coverage and from thinking and talking about the events.

**Check in on older people around you.** Coping may be more difficult for older adults living alone, those with mental health problems or with few social supports. Reaching out to connect with them can be a big help.

[more tips >](#)

## When to seek more help

Most people, if given support, will recover almost completely from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience within a few weeks. However, some will need more help to heal. It's important to watch for the following signs and contact a medical professional if they last more than 2 to 4 weeks:

- Trouble with sleeping and eating
- Feeling depressed or hopeless, showing low energy or crying often
- Being anxious and fearful
- Trouble focusing on daily activities
- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event
- Avoiding activities or places that are reminders of the event

### If you are struggling right now

BC's Mental Health Support Line is open to talk you through the problem, 24 hours a day at 310-6789 (no area code). This service is provided by the Distress Line Network of BC.

## About the Canadian Mental Health Association

Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.



Canadian Mental Health Association  
British Columbia  
Mental health for all

[www.cmha.bc.ca](http://www.cmha.bc.ca)

## Helping Younger Children Ages 5 and younger

### Provide concrete explanations

For example: “The wind broke a tree branch, and it fell on an electrical line. That’s why the lights don’t work.”

### Let them know there are good people helping

Encourage them to help if they can, or send thank you letters to those who helped.

### Expect a return to younger behaviours

Typical responses can include crying, whimpering, trembling and clinging. They may also show younger behaviours such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting and fear of darkness. Let them know this is okay.



### Reassure them that you will keep them safe

Find ways to protect them from further harm and exposure to upsetting images. Avoid too much disaster news.

## Helping Older Children Ages 6 to 11

### Ask them what they understand and how they feel about it

Fears are often based on misinformation.

### Allow them to ask questions

But try not to focus on it too long—focus on the present instead. It’s okay to say if you don’t know.

### Try to keep a regular routine with activities, meals and bedtime

Allow kids to play with friends. Routine can be very reassuring.

### Allow them to make decisions and feel in control

It’s even more important to give them choices on what to wear, eat, etc.

### Allow them to cry or be angry

You may also notice withdrawal, disruptive behaviour, or inability to pay attention. Nightmares, irrational fears or outbursts of anger are also common after trauma. Let them know it’s normal to feel upset.



### Be honest with your feelings so they know it’s ok to express theirs

Spend extra time with them. Tell them it can take time to overcome loss or trauma.

## Helping Adolescents Ages 12 to 17

### Acknowledge their feelings

They may experience flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, depression, substance use and anti-social behaviour. Ask how you can support them.

### Ensure that they are patient with themselves and others

Disaster recovery can be a long, slow process.



### Encourage them to help in the community

Community spirit and rebuilding can be very uplifting, and can help them feel useful rather than helpless.

### Some may be more vulnerable

The impact of a traumatic event is likely to be greatest if they previously have been the victim of abuse or trauma, or have had a mental health problem. Be prepared to offer extra support.