

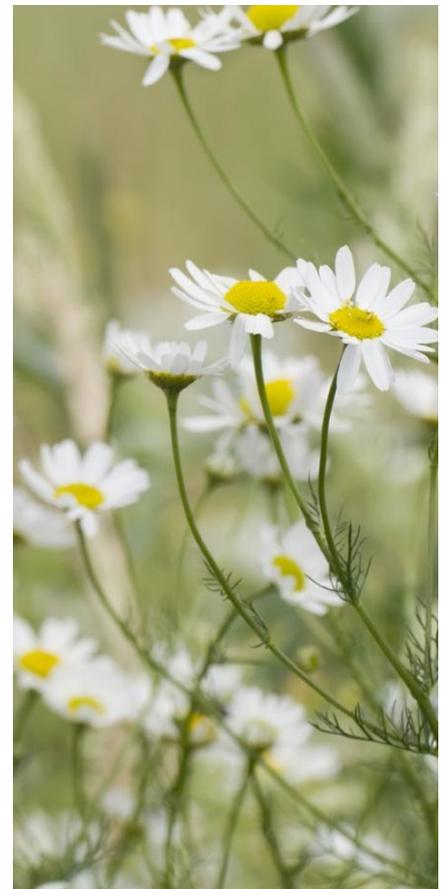
Self Care After a Major Incident

In Australia we regularly face damage from storms, fires, drought, flood and cyclones. Every event has an impact, and every few years we regrettably face an event of catastrophic proportions. Often these events emerge quickly and many people are caught off guard. Lives, homes and property, pets, businesses and crops can be lost with little or no warning causing distress, heartbreak and hardship.

When major incidents occur, it is very common for us to experience a range of thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical responses that are unusual. These can be confusing and frightening and add further to the distress already being experienced. They can have a profound impact on your physical and psychological wellbeing. Be assured that these are not unusual or alarming, but rather are normal reactions to an extraordinary situation.

While the experience of each person is different, there are a number of common responses. It can be reassuring to know that while these responses are unpleasant they are normal reactions in a normal person that occur in response to an abnormal event. Some of the common reactions you may experience include:

- ▶ Disbelief at what has happened
- ▶ Feeling numb, or as if things are unreal
- ▶ Confusion and disorientation
- ▶ Poor memory and concentration
- ▶ Fear for the safety of yourself, your family or others
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping – getting to sleep, staying asleep, restless or disturbed sleep and feeling tired despite sleep
- ▶ Recurring memories or bad dreams related to the event
- ▶ Replaying the event and inventing different outcomes in order to prepare for a recurrence of the event
- ▶ Feeling sad for no reason, or waves of grief
- ▶ Feeling sad about the losses, both human and material
- ▶ Guilt about what you did, or did not do
- ▶ Increased heart rate, sometimes with chest pain
- ▶ Breathing problems
- ▶ Trembling, sweating, dizziness
- ▶ Nausea, diarrhoea or constipation
- ▶ Changes in appetite



These are not signs of weakness but normal reactions to an abnormal event. These reactions are generally at their worst in the first week or two after the incident. In most cases they will diminish over the following weeks, although some may experience them for a longer period. If at any time these reactions seriously affect your ability to participate in day to day activities at home or at work it is important to seek assistance immediately.

Following a major incident it is important to have access to an environment where you feel safe and secure. The sooner you can regain your sense of safety and control the sooner your wellbeing will start to improve. During this time you may also need to engage with a number of different services and organisations as you start to rebuild from the incident. This can be a challenging time and it can be helpful to allow others to assist you and to deal with matters in your own time.

The following steps may assist you to make the recovery more manageable for you and those close to you:

- ▶ Spend time with your family and friends – allow them to support you emotionally
- ▶ Keep in contact with others even though you may feel like isolating yourself
- ▶ Allow others to help you – accept help when it is offered
- ▶ Limit the amount of exposure you have to media coverage of the incident
- ▶ Try to return to a normal routine as soon as you can (this is particularly important if you have children)
- ▶ Think about your health – get plenty of rest even if you can't sleep, eat a balanced diet and get some regular exercise, even if just a short walk
- ▶ Limit your intake of tea, coffee, cola, chocolate and cigarettes
- ▶ Take time out to do some things you enjoy
- ▶ Write your experience down – writing can be particularly helpful for those who find it difficult to talk about it
- ▶ Don't expect to have the answers – it is ok to feel uncertain or lacking in confidence
- ▶ Be more careful than usual even with day to day activities such as driving, cooking or using machinery

During this time it may be tempting to engage in some activities that will hinder your recovery. Try to avoid:

- ▶ Using alcohol or other substances to help you cope
- ▶ Withdrawing from family and friends – some time alone is ok but try not to spend too much time alone
- ▶ Making any major decisions or life changing decisions
- ▶ Working too much – keeping busy is positive but take care not to overdo it
- ▶ Stressful situations at work or home – it can sometimes be hard to avoid but try to reduce stressful interactions
- ▶ Not engaging in enjoyable activities – despite the suffering you have experienced it is positive to take time to enjoy yourself

A small number of people may experience symptoms that indicate a need to seek professional help. The following are warning signs that you should seek **immediate** assistance:

- ▶ Loss of hope or interest in the future
- ▶ Feeling overwhelming fear for no obvious reason
- ▶ If the distress interferes with your ability to participate in day to day activities
- ▶ Excessive guilt about things that did or did not occur
- ▶ Panic symptoms (increased heart rate, breathlessness, shakiness, dizziness and a sudden urge to go to the toilet)
- ▶ Avoiding things that bring back memories of what occurred to the point where daily tasks can't be carried out
- ▶ Thoughts of harm to yourself or others

Over time most people recover by drawing on their inner strength and reserve, with the support of family, friends and colleagues, and by accessing support from specialist services such as your EAP or GP. Remember that you are not alone – help and support is available to guide and assist you through this challenging time.

Your EAP is there to help

Remember the EAP offers support through confidential face-to-face, telephone and online counselling for individuals and coaching and advice for managers. Appointments can be made by telephoning your EAP provider, Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), on **1300 360 364**.