

Supporting your teenager through natural disasters

A letter from The Ballina School Counselling Service

Dear parents and carers,

Following a natural disaster any reaction can be normal. No two individuals will experience or respond in the same way. Over the coming weeks, many children will experience some of following difficulties:

- difficulties concentrating or struggling with their school work
- withdrawal, not wanting to come to school or lack of interest in usual activities/ games/ sport
- difficulties in relationships with family, peers and others
- sleeplessness, oversleeping, or nightmares
- becoming upset easily, irritability, or moody
- complaints about feeling sick, headaches, tiredness

These are normal reactions to *abnormal* events.

What you can do to help:

- **Make sure you are coping.** You are the most important person in your child's recovery. It is really important that you get the help and support you need, as this will help you support your children. Seek out your own support from other adults or services. Avoid talking about your fears and financial losses to your teens directly. Be cautious that they may feel overwhelmed if they overhear adult discussions.
- **Provide Stability.** Maintain regular routines where possible. This includes regular eating, sleeping and exercise schedules. Let your teen return to their regular activities as soon as practical, including socialising.
- **Listen to them.** Provide a calm and supportive environment where you talk to them about their worries or concerns. Acknowledge that this is a difficult time. Listen and help them feel heard, even if their worries seem trivial in the scheme of things. Try not to compare their worries to other people or dismiss them by saying there are others who are worse off.
- **Offer Reassurance.** Reassure them that this will pass and you will get through this together. The government, local community, their school and friends and family are here to support them. Always reassure them about how you will keep them safe.
- **Normalise their Response.** They may find a sense of relief in knowing that their reactions to this event is normal. Some teens may feel guilty for being distressed when they know others may have lost more. Reassure them that there is no right or wrong way to feel and we all need time to process our own emotions. Remember teens may experience distress even if they are not experiencing the event personally.
- **Encourage Calmness.** Use coping strategies to assist them to reduce their worries such as using stress balls, deep breathing exercises and relaxation activities. Guided relaxation activities can be found on YouTube or free apps (listed on the next page). Limit exposure to distressing scenes and media coverage.
- **Promote Smiles.** Organise fun activities with family and friends where possible. Ask your teen to help decide on these.
- **Stay connected.** Allow teens to stay connected with their social network and to talk to and see their friends. Teens will likely seek most of their emotional support from their own friends. If your child's friends are experiencing significant distress and communicating this to your child, encourage them to tell their own parents/caregivers or another adult they trust.

- **Continue to check in.** Continue to ask your teens how they are coping, even after the flood risk is gone and the clean-up is finished.

The majority of teens will return to their normal selves in the weeks and months afterwards. Some may even experience positive changes – such as feeling like the floods have brought their family or friends closer together or feeling uplifted by strong community support.




When to seek further support:

- For a small percentage of teens, distressing feelings and thoughts persist over the coming months or get worse over time. If the distress is not going away or is interfering with day-to-day life, you should discuss it with your GP and ask family and friends for support.
- If your family was significantly affected in the event, or you lost a family member, loved one, pet, livestock, or continue to have ongoing disruptions and difficulties, then your teen is also more likely to need further support. If you have significant concerns about your teen, please seek support early.

Where to access support:

- Empower your teen to ask for help themselves or support them to ask for help together if you can.
- Encourage or help your teen refer themselves to headspace Lismore.
- Let their Year Advisor know that they are struggling so that school can be providing them with additional support.
- The school counselling service are also available for appointments. Parent referrals can be made by contacting school, or your teen can self-refer by asking a trusted teacher for an appointment with our team or dropping into the counsellor office.
- **Emergencies or Crisis Support:** Call 000 immediately.


Some additional sources of support for you and your family:

-  **ParentLine** Phone 1300 1300 52 or send a message to info@parentline.org.au
-  **Kids Helpline** Phone 1800 551800 or web chat and resources at www.kidshelp.com.au
-  **Lifeline** Phone 13 11 14 or web chat and resources at www.lifeline.org.au



at www.headspace.org.au, Lismore 66250200 enquiries@headspace-lismore.org.au

[How to cope with the stress of natural disasters](#) [Supporting a young person after a natural disaster](#)

-  **Mental Health Line 1800 011 511** Phone 1800 011 511, operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Free apps for your teen to support their wellbeing:



Smiling Mind
Meditation and mindfulness app for children, youth, and adults.



ReachOut Breathe
Helps you reduce the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety by slowing down your breathing and heart rate.



What's Up?
An app to help you cope with anxiety, stress and feelings of depression.



The Check-in
An app to take the fear out of talking with a friend who might be struggling.



i Bobby
Social and emotional wellbeing self-help app tailored to ATSI young people (15+ years).



Calm Harm
Provides tasks that help young people resist or manage the urge to self-harm.