

MANAGING PRE-EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES DURING DISASTER AND RECOVERY

Existing mental health issues can make recovery from natural disasters more complex. Community connections, extended community support services and good self-care can all help as you manage this difficult time.

QUICK FACTS

When you're already dealing with a mental health issue, living through a natural disaster can seem pretty tough. Reactions like fear, distress and confusion can sometimes exacerbate, or be hard to separate, from the symptoms you're already experiencing.

It's important to know that a pre-existing mental health issue or previous trauma can put you at higher risk of distress from subsequent trauma¹, but knowing what to expect can make it easier to work on recovering and rebuilding.

WILL MY EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES CHANGE?

A range of biological, social and psychological factors contribute to mental health issues. Some anxiety disorders, personality disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are influenced by trauma^{2 3}. If you're managing one of these issues already, you might be more vulnerable to further feelings of trauma and distress⁴ during a natural disaster.

Our brains and bodies process traumatic events in all sorts of ways, which can be hard to predict. If you're living with a mental health issue that's not linked to trauma, what you're feeling now might be unfamiliar, but even if you have a history of trauma, these feelings could be new.

However, you may also find your existing symptoms are not changed or exacerbated at all. Being aware of the signs will help you understand what extra support you might need, if any.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR?

When you've been living with a mental health issue for a long time, you get to know the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours that are 'signs' of a need to boost your self-care strategies or seek extra support. You probably have a good understanding of how you feel on a daily basis, and a doctor or counsellor may have taught you useful strategies for managing hard periods in your life.

During disaster events and recovery, you might notice familiar symptoms more often than usual, or brand new symptoms. Your 'baseline' can be quite different from someone else's, so it's important to be aware of changes that could mean you need more support than usual, including:

- Feelings of anxiety, depression or distress that don't go away, even after using your usual coping techniques
- additional intrusive thoughts, worries, or hearing voices that are unfamiliar to you or frightening
- persistent and overwhelming guilt, anger or fear
- repeated feelings of 'reliving' the experience, also called ['flashbacks'](#)
- withdrawing from or avoiding your usual activities, like seeing friends and going to work or school
- an increased use of alcohol or other substances to cope with the experience
- a sense that this is not how you would usually react.

WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING?

Existing mental health issues don't just disappear when devastation strikes. But the new feelings, thoughts or sensations you're experiencing could stick around for months or years to come. As you work through recovery from a natural disaster, you should continue your existing mental health care plan as closely as possible.

If you do notice new or different symptoms, it's important to seek help from a qualified professional. If a natural disaster has affected access to your support network, help is available through support lines like [SANE's free counselling service](#), your GP and emergency services. You might also be able to claim [extra or telehealth counselling and psychology sessions](#), so you can access care when things are really tough.

Make sure you're checking in regularly with trusted family, friends or work colleagues, too. They may notice changes in you that you can't see yourself.

HOW CAN I DEAL WITH ALL OF THIS AT ONCE?

Managing a complex mental health issue can be really challenging even at the best of times. What you're feeling now might be new – and it can be really hard. Most people never have to live through the devastation you have seen.

It's normal for your relationships with regular support people and places to feel different. You'll be talking about new thoughts and feelings, and you might not have the words to explain them yet. Trauma-informed care can support you in a way that's sensitive to your experience and won't expose you to further harm.

Be as open as it feels safe to be. With more information, your GP or mental health professional can carefully help as you recover.

HOW SHOULD I CARE FOR MYSELF RIGHT NOW?

You might already have helpful techniques you've learned for coping with or managing existing mental health issues. Continue to follow the advice of your doctor or counsellor.

It can also help to:

- keep a regular routine to stay grounded
- stay connected to your community and the people you care about (and who care for you!)
- recognise your limitations and when it's time to take a break
- establish healthy boundaries, for example by limiting the amount of time you spend watching the news, setting time for your own respite, or being realistic about how much energy you have to support others. Communicate these to others, if you feel comfortable.
- treat yourself with kindness – you're doing your best

You might like to explore [SANE's guide to self-care during disaster recovery](#).

FINDING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If you're concerned about how you're feeling, speak to your existing mental health professional, or contact the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 7263 for information, advice and referral. You can also connect with others who have experienced trauma and complex mental health issues, and who understand what you're going through via our [online, moderated, anonymous forums](#).

STAYING HOPEFUL FOR THE FUTURE

With the right self-care and outside support, you will get through this. It's okay if you feel like you haven't made any progress for a while – every step you take is helping, even if you can't see it right away.

REFERENCES

1. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ronald_Kessler/publication/12939092_Previous_Exposure_to_Trauma_and_PTSD_Effects_of_Subsequent_Trauma_Results_From_the_Detroit_Area_Survey_of_Trauma/links/5ab67eeba6fdcc46d3b6b078/Previous-Exposure-to-Trauma-and-PTSD-Effects-of-Subsequent-Trauma-Results-From-the-Detroit-Area-Survey-of-Trauma.pdf
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3106304/>
3. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165178117304055>
4. See 1.