

Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health

Growing together through natural disasters

Supporting families
with babies and
young children



Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health

<https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/our-work/birdies-tree-natural-disaster-recovery>

The Birdie's Tree books and resources have been created on the traditional lands of the Turrbal and Jagera people. Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all land and sea countries throughout Australia, and pays respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.



The Explanation of the Artwork

Grounding: Rocks represents our inner strength when we hit rock bottom there is no other direction but up. Everyone experiences or knows someone with mental health. Keeping ourselves grounded makes us realise there is help and we deserve that help.



Introduction

This booklet aims to support you and your family after a natural disaster. It will help you understand what you might be feeling, and the possible impact of the disaster on your emotional wellbeing and mental health. It will also help you understand how your baby or young child might be feeling. There are many things you can do to move on from the disaster as a family.

Natural disasters can be highly stressful, both during the event and in the aftermath. Stress can have a significant impact on your ability to function. Not all stress is within your control, but it is important to reduce stress where you can. Be kind to yourself—looking after yourself will help you look after your child and respond to your child's needs.

Babies and young children can easily become distressed by what is happening in the world around them. Anything that has a serious effect on the family, or creates stress, can make a baby or young child feel unsafe and unsettled.

Without help, children may continue to be affected by the natural disaster, which can have long-term impacts on their physical and social development, and their emotional wellbeing.

Babies and young children manage their feelings through their relationships with parents and other caring adults. Your child depends on you to feel safe and secure. Babies and young children are very sensitive to their parents' emotional state, so taking care of yourself is one of the best ways you can take care of your child.

The relationship between you and your child becomes especially important when your family is recovering from a natural disaster. This booklet offers suggestions to help your family's emotional wellbeing at this time.



Knowing when things aren't going well – for you

Natural disasters affect people in different ways. Each family member may react differently to the same event. Seek professional help if you or your family are struggling to recover following a disaster.

Listed below are some common physical and emotional reactions for parents, following a natural disaster:

- feeling numb and detached, or overwhelmed
- feeling tearful, sad or guilty
- feeling anxious or irritable
- feeling jumpy, restless and unable to focus
- feeling unable to plan ahead
- changes in sleep or appetite
- troubling memories or bad dreams
- constant questioning and distressed thoughts
- 'reliving' the event.

Always seek professional help, if you or a family member experiences any of the following:

- the above symptoms continue for longer than one month and affect your day-to-day functioning
- feelings of hopelessness or lack of interest in the future
- avoiding things that bring back memories of what happened
- being fearful, nervous or panicky (racing heart, startling easily, dizziness, shortness of breath)
- lack of energy and ongoing tiredness or numbness
- lack of enjoyment from things that you usually enjoy
- having trouble relating to and caring for your child
- feeling guilty
- wanting to harm yourself or your child, or thinking about ending your life.



These reactions can be severe, and are usually worst during or straight after the event. In most cases, they fade over time.

Knowing when things aren't going well – for your baby or young child

Listed below are some common physical and emotional reactions for babies and young children, following a natural disaster:

- being clingy, whingey, whiney or unsettled – crying more
- seeming fearful, especially when parents are not present
- being more withdrawn, less responsive to parents and/or others
- eating less or more than usual
- having difficulty sleeping
- being hard to settle and soothe.

Young children may also:

- be more easily frustrated and have more tantrums
- be more aggressive
- act out scary events in their play
- have nightmares
- lose previous skills or 'go backwards' e.g. toileting, walking, talking

If your baby or young child continues to experience any of the above symptoms and this causes you difficulty or concern, seek professional help.

Always seek professional help if your baby or young child:

- loses a lot of weight
- has an ongoing lack of appetite or is overeating
- lacks eye contact or lacks their usual energy
- loses interest in other people
- appears watchful or worried
- stops talking
- lacks curiosity in the world around them
- has ongoing sleep and settling difficulties.



Look after yourself

To help your family recover from this stressful event, it is important to look after yourself.

You can:

- be kind to yourself and have reasonable expectations
- break tasks down into small manageable pieces
- schedule time for yourself
- take time to relax by doing something you enjoy, maybe
 - watch a movie
 - read a book or magazine
 - keep a journal
 - have a bath or shower
 - go out for a coffee
- try to get enough sleep or rest
- congratulate yourself on small achievements.

Look after your family

Cleaning up or helping family members and friends after a natural disaster may mean that parents are away from their children for periods of time.

This in itself can add to the stress you are feeling. A sense of family can provide stability in times of chaos.

You can:

- get back to family routines and traditions as soon as possible
- find time to have fun together as a family, doing something you enjoy
- think about each family member's needs, as well as the family as a whole
- support each family member to process the event in their own way
- involve family members in the clean-up and repair, in age-appropriate ways
- involve family members in replacing clothes and possessions
- have dinner together
- watch a movie together
- go for a walk, go to a park, play a game together.



Looking after your baby or young child

Babies and young children can easily become distressed by what is happening in the world around them. They do not always have the words to tell you what they need or how they feel, so they rely on you to help them feel safe and understood.

You can help your baby or young child feel safe by:

- reassuring them with your presence, and understanding their need to be close to you
- answering their questions, being honest, and not giving them more information than they need
- making sure they are not exposed to news footage of the disaster on TV and radio
- avoiding discussing worrying topics in front of them – babies and young children often understand more of adult conversation than we realise
- being kind and gentle with them
- setting limits as needed
- re-establishing regular routines as soon as possible – babies and young children find this calming
- providing a special toy.

You can help your baby or young child feel understood by:

- thinking about what their behaviour might be telling you about their feelings (all behaviour has meaning)
- being patient with them and keeping your expectations reasonable
- talking about and naming your child's feelings and emotions (you can use the Feeling Bears at the end of the booklet)
- following your child's lead to talk about what happened. Speak for them and use the words they would use if they could (you can use puppets to talk about events)
- being aware of signs that could indicate your child is distressed
- allowing your child to process what has happened, through their play.





Communicate and connect with others

Talk with other people about your experience of the natural disaster, and try to understand what it was like for them. This will help you process what has happened. It can also provide emotional support for you, your family and your child.

You can:

- talk with your partner about how you are both feeling
- take time to communicate and connect with all of your children, including babies and young children
- spend time with your extended family, to provide both practical and emotional support for you and your family
- talk with other adults and families in your community who have shared your experiences of the disaster
- contact local community services for support – your local community shares your experience and is likely to understand what support you and your family need.

Talk with others who support your baby or young child

Sometimes you need others to look after your child, while you get on with the tasks of moving forward or looking after yourself. Tell these people about your baby or young child.

Include things like:

- times your child usually eats
- what food your child likes or does not like to eat
- sleep routines (sleep times, favourite toy or blanket)
- tips on settling/comforting your child (patting, rocking, singing)
- favourite toys, songs, nursery rhymes, TV characters, music
- list of allergies
- list of medications (doses and times)
- Provide a photo of the family/you for your child to keep with them.

Communicate and connect with your baby or young child

Communicating and connecting with you helps relieve your child's stress and helps them feel safe.

On the next few pages are some activities for families. Feel free to make up your own fun with your child.

You can:

- touch, stroke or massage your child
- look through the pictures in this booklet together
- read books together
- talk about what your child is doing
- talk about what YOU are doing
- play with your child, but don't take over
- follow your child's lead by doing what interests them
- let your child change the game
- add humour and laugh with each other
- sing and make music together
- let your child experiment and play with toys or objects in a different way
- appreciate your child's efforts, e.g. display their works of art.



Some activities to do with your baby or young child

Inside activities

Make craft together

Draw, paint or colour-in

Read books

Play dress-ups

Play peekaboo

Sing, dance or listen to music
(you can use the Songs and Rhymes on the next page)

Build a cubby

Play with construction toys like blocks or lego



**Outdoor
activities**

Visit the library

Go to the park

Play ball games

Arrange a
play date with
friends

Blow bubbles

Go for a
nature walk
and talk
about what
you find

Have a picnic



Songs and rhymes

Singing and doing action rhymes with your child can help them process the frightening sensations they experienced during the disaster. Recreating these sounds through play gives children a sense of control over them, and helps affirm that the child is safe now.

I Hear Thunder

To the tune of
"Frere Jacques"

I hear thunder, I hear thunder

(stamp feet)

Hark don't you? Hark don't you?

(put hand to ear and listen)

Pitter patter rain drops, pitter patter
rain drops *(flutter fingers downward)*

I'm wet through *(shake body)*

So are you *(point fingers)*

Incy Wincy Spider

Incy Wincy Spider climbed up the
water spout *(climb fingers up)*

Down came the rain and washed
poor Incy out *(flutter hands down,
then move in and out)*

Out came the sunshine and dried
up all the rain *(make an arc in the air, then
raise hands up)*

So Incy Wincy spider climbed up the
spout again *(climb fingers up again)*





If you're
happy
and you
know it

If you're happy and you know it
clap your hands *(clap, clap)*

If you're happy and you know it
clap your hands *(clap, clap)*

If you're happy and you know it and you
really want to show it

If you're happy and you know it clap
your hands *(clap, clap)*

If you're sad and you know it have a cry
– boo hoo *(rub your eyes)*

If you're sad and you know it have a cry
– boo hoo *(rub your eyes)*

If you're sad and you know it and you
really want to show it

If you're sad and you know it have a cry
– boo hoo *(rub your eyes)*

If you're angry and you know it
stamp your feet *(stamp stamp)*

If you're angry and you know it
stamp your feet *(stamp stamp)*

If you're angry and you know it and
you really want to show it

If you're angry and you know it
stamp your feet *(stamp stamp)*


If you're scared and you know it
have a cuddle *(cuddle self)*

If you're scared and you know it
have a cuddle *(cuddle self)*

If you're scared and you know it
and you really want to show it

If you're scared and you know it
have a cuddle *(cuddle self)*





This is the Sound

To the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush'

This is the sound the fire makes,
sizzle pop sizzle pop

(sizzle: flutter finger up; pop: clap)

.....
This is the sound the fire makes

.....
Burning all the trees

.....
This is the sound the rain makes,
pitter patter, pitter patter

(flutter fingers downward)

.....
This is the sound the rain makes

.....
Splashing on the ground

.....
This is the sound the thunder makes,
boom boom, boom boom

(stamp feet)

.....
This the sound the thunder makes

.....
When the storm is coming

This is the sound the wind makes,
whosh whosh, whosh whosh

(sway from side to side)

.....
This is the sound the wind makes

.....
Rushing through the trees

.....
This is the sound the chopper makes,
chooka chooka chooka chooka

(spin in a circle)

.....
This is the sound the chopper makes

.....
Helping all the people

.....
This is the sound the fire truck makes
wooo - ooo, wooo - ooo

(twirl a hand above head)

.....
This is the sound the fire truck makes

.....
Putting out the fire

Two Little Dickie Birds

.....
Two little dickie birds sitting on
a wall *(Put both pointer fingers up for
birds sitting on wall)*

.....
One named Peter one named Paul
(wiggle each finger with each bird's name)

.....
Fly away Peter, fly away Paul *(fly each
finger behind the back for each bird)*

.....
Come back Peter, come back Paul
(fly each finger back to the front for each bird)

Galumph went
the little green
frog one day



Twinkle
Twinkle
Little Star

Galumph went the little green frog
one day *(make a fist and then open it out
on 'galumph')*

Galumph went the little green frog
(make a fist and then open it out on 'galumph')

Galumph went the little green frog one
day *(make a fist and then open it out
on 'galumph')*

and the frog went Gloomp Gloomp
Gloomp *(make a fist and then open it
out 3 times)*

But we all know frogs go *(clap)*
ladedadeda ladedadeda ladedadeda
(wave hands from side to side)

We all know frogs go *(clap)* ladedadeda
(wave hands from side to side)

They don't go Gloomp Gloomp Gloomp
*(shake head and make a fist and then open it out
3 times)*

Twinkle Twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are



Moving forward beyond just surviving

Recovery is a journey that takes time. Looking to the future can help you and your family cope with what has happened and build a sense of hope.

You can:

- focus on each step of progress made, however small, and celebrate it
- reflect on the positive aspects of your life
- do enjoyable activities even if you don't feel like it
- laugh and have fun with family and friends when you can
- embrace life and all it has to offer
- make plans for the future, like arranging a birthday party or a fun outing.



Recovery is a journey
that takes time.

Help your baby or young child move forward

Babies and young children find comfort in familiar people, activities, routines and objects (such as toys). By bringing back structure to their world, you can help them start focussing on the future.

You can:

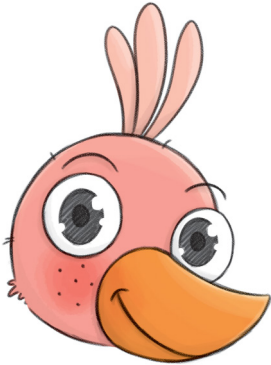
- reassure your child that they are safe now, and that you will be together
- help your child focus on the future and things they enjoy
- replace your child's special possessions as soon as possible
- reassure your child about the future, especially the small things that are important to them
- encourage your child to play and laugh, even if the adults around them don't feel like it
- organise play dates for your child and their friends.



Birdie's feelings

You can use these Birdie images to talk with your baby or young child about emotions and feelings.

I am feeling...



Happy



Scared



Angry



Sad



Where to get help

Telephone and support services

General

- Your local doctor (General Practitioner)
- Lifeline (24 hrs) **13 11 14**
- 13 Health **13 432 584**
- beyondblue info line **1300 224 636**
- Relationships Australia **1300 364 277**

Adults

- PANDA (Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia) **1300 726 306**
- Women's Health Queensland Wide Inc. **(07) 3216 0376**
(outside Brisbane) **1800 017 676**
- Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline (24 hrs) **1800 882 436**
- Mensline Australia (24 hrs) **1300 789 978**

Children

- Local Child and Youth Mental Health Service (Queensland Health) **childrens.health.qld.gov.au/mental-health-services**
- Parent Line (8am – 10pm daily) **1300 301 300**



Online services


- Information about natural disaster recovery **childrens.health.qld.gov.au/natural-disaster-recovery**
- Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia **panda.org.au**
- Information on depression and anxiety **beyondblue.org.au**
- Information on depression and anxiety **blackdoginstitute.org.au**
- Information about mental health and wellbeing **ontrack.org.au**
- Information about baby and toddler behaviour **zerotothree.org**
- Information about mothers and babies **mothersmatter.co.nz**
- Australia parenting website **raisingchildren.net.au**




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