

Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health

Recovering together after a natural disaster

Supporting families in pregnancy and early parenthood



Common experiences

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 before and after the birth of your baby.

Under normal circumstances, pregnancy and early parenthood can be a stressful time. Experiencing a disaster at this time may increase the risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety or depression.

Natural disasters can affect people in different ways. Below are some of the common concerns parents may have during this time.

Before the birth of your baby you may have concerns about:

- strong emotions during pregnancy, which may be worse in times of stress
- the world your baby is being born into
- your ability to give birth safely and access medical care
- providing a safe place for your baby after birth
- financial security
- feeling frustrated because pregnancy and birth can limit how much you can help in the recovery from the disaster
- how you will bond with your baby with so much going on.

After the birth you may have additional concerns about:

- your baby's safety
- leaving your baby with others and wanting to keep your baby close
- accepting that the hopes and desires you have for your baby and family may have to change because of the disaster
- where to access medical and community support
- looking after baby with all the demands on your time
- feeling guilty when hearing about less fortunate people in the community
- changes in routine as a result of the disaster.



Looking after yourself

Stress can have a significant impact on your ability to function and can affect your baby while you are pregnant. Not all stress is within your control, but it is important to reduce stress where you can.

After going through a stressful event you may feel bad for some time. This feeling should eventually pass. Be kind to yourself—looking after yourself will help you look after your baby and respond to your baby's needs.

Helpful hints

Take small steps, this will help you feel less overwhelmed and regain a sense of control. Try to avoid making major decisions until you feel better.

Be realistic about what you can get done at this time and focus on what is most important.

Get help if things aren't working. Asking for help can be hard, but it is important for you and your baby. If you're not getting the support you need, keep insisting until you get it.

Accept support even if it's difficult to do so. Help from others makes things easier when you're looking after a baby.



Your baby depends on you to feel safe and secure. Babies 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 baby. This is particularly true at times of stress, when your baby is likely to feel upset by what is happening around them.

Holding things together

Routines

Regular daily tasks provide routine at a time when everything feels like chaos. Knowing what to expect can help you, your baby and your family to feel more comfortable.

Communication

Talking to others about what you're thinking and feeling can help you feel less alone. It may surprise you that other people have similar thoughts and feelings, and you can support each other.

Connecting with your baby

Talk with your baby in an age-appropriate way about what has been happening with your family. You may like to refer to the booklet *"Recovering Together: Supporting families with babies and young children after a disaster"*.

Family connection

Connect with a family member about what has happened for you and how you're feeling. Talk with them about how as a family you can support each other. You don't have to shoulder this on your own.

Community support and connection

Straight after the disaster, use the services that come into your community to help you get back on your feet. It is also important to connect with services that are part of your community, such as local schools and churches.

Focus on the positive

Take one day at a time. Use your strengths and the things you are good at. Focus on what's going well for you, your baby, your family and your community.





Bouncing back

Planning enjoyable and relaxing activities is a great way to take time out and can reduce your stress and lift your spirits. Try to participate in activities, even if you don't feel like doing anything. Below are some suggested relaxing activities.

For yourself

- watch a movie
- read a book
- have a massage
- write a journal
- call a friend
- play music that you enjoy
- have a sleep or a rest
- go to the shops, have a coffee or visit a friend
- take a relaxing bath or shower.

With your family

- laugh and be silly together
- read your baby's favourite stories
- listen to music together and sing along
- share a hug
- dance to your favourite tunes
- play games
- go to the park.



Knowing when things aren't going well

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 after the disaster. Looking after yourself helps you look after your baby.

Common reactions to a 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.

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

Always seek professional help, if you or a family member experience 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 baby
- feeling guilty
- wanting to harm yourself or your baby, or thinking about ending your life.

Where to get help

Telephone and support services

General

- Your local doctor (General Practitioner)
- Lifeline (24 hrs) **13 11 14**
- 13 Health **13 43 25 84**
- beyondblue info line **1300 22 4636**
- 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 88 2436**
- 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 30 1300**

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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