

Evacuations and your mental health

If you are in immediate danger or need urgent medical care, call 9-1-1

This information has been adapted from Phoenix Australia (<https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/>) and Health Canada (<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/evacuations-mental-health.html>).

It is okay to not be okay

If you have been forced to leave your home due to a hazard like a flood or wildfire, it's normal to experience a range of emotions and reactions like:

Behavioural reactions	Emotional reactions	Physical reactions	Cognitive reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater startle response• Restlessness• Sleep and appetite disturbances• Difficulty expressing yourself• Argumentative behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Numbness and detachment• Anxiety and/or severe fear• Exhilaration (due to surviving)• Guilt (including survivor guilt)• Anger• Sadness• Helplessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nausea and/or gastrointestinal distress• Sweating or shivering• Faintness• Muscle tremors or shaking• Elevated pulse, breathing, and/or blood pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rumination or racing thoughts (e.g., replaying the traumatic event over and over)• Distortion of time and space (e.g., feeling like the traumatic event is happening in

Behavioural reactions	Emotional reactions	Physical reactions	Cognitive reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased use of alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs Withdrawal and apathy Avoidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Derealization and/or depersonalization (e.g., feeling like you're watching yourself from outside your body) Freezing Dissociation Disorientation Feeling out of control Feeling overwhelmed Denial Constriction of feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extreme fatigue or exhaustion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> slow motion; feeling like a few seconds can last minutes) Concentration problems Memory problems (e.g., failing to recall important aspects of the trauma) Strong identification with victims

Tips to help

Here are some pointers to help you prepare for, cope with, and recover from emergencies.

Before an emergency

Being prepared for an emergency can help reduce stress. Create a self-care plan to prepare yourself emotionally.

- Try to predict your personal reactions — ask yourself how you might feel.
- How do you react to stress?

- How do you know when you are stressed? Use the Mental Health Continuum Model (<https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/mental-health-continuum-model/>) to help you think about stress responses and know when to reach out for help.
- What has made you feel better during stressful or hard times in the past? How might you include those strategies during an emergency?
- How do you help yourself relax?
- Make a plan about who to turn to for support if you're directly impacted by an environmental hazard. This could include:
 - Family and friends
 - People from your community
 - People from outside your community
 - Family doctor and/or local mental health supports
- Have a list of available resources, services, or hotlines in advance. Check our mental health resources (<https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/category/mental-health-resources/>) to get started.
- Prepare an emergency plan:
 - Write down emergency phone numbers.
 - Write down what might help you manage your stress and anxiety during an emergency.
 - Talk to people whom you have relied on in the past or to whom you can look in the future about how you can support one another during an emergency.
 - Make a list of medications you are taking and might need to bring along in case of an evacuation. Include a note about how to store these.

During an emergency

Let yourself grieve, prioritize healthy habits, and take it one step at a time.

- Put your own oxygen mask on first. If you're taken care of, it'll be easier to take care of others.
- Maintain a daily routine as much as possible. Do things that give you pleasure.
- Try to keep your family and social support network in close physical proximity.

- As much as possible, eat healthy foods and get plenty of fluids, sleep, and exercise.
- Think about what has helped you to manage stress in the past and do those things as much as you can.
- Pay attention to your senses and visualize positive experiences. For example, imagine the sounds, smells, and sights of a scene you find calming.
- Set priorities. Decide what can be done and what can wait.
- Set small goals to give yourself a sense of accomplishment and signal that you are taking care of yourself and others.
- Stay informed. Focus on reliable sources of information. Limit exposure to television and social media content about the disaster to avoid increasing distress.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Accept available support and assistance.
- Allow yourself to feel sad and grieve.
- Use the Mental Health Continuum Model (<https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/mental-health-continuum-model/>) to help you think about common stress responses and when to reach out for help.
- Learn what local and virtual mental health resources are available.
- If your mental health response is overwhelming and unmanageable, attend your local emergency room or call crisis supports.
- Visit our mental health resources (<https://canemerg-urgencecan.com/category/mental-health-resources/>) to see a list of supports.

After an emergency

Make time for friends, family, and community activities. Reach out for support and assistance.

- Eat, hydrate, exercise, and rest on a regular basis.
- Be cautious about using alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs to manage distressing emotions.
- Take small steps toward getting back to a normal life where you can. Engage in fun and restoring behaviours, including exercise, hobbies, and social activities.

- Find healthy ways to relax, such as breathing exercises, meditation, mindfulness, calming self-talk, and soothing music.
- Visit and stay connected with friends, family, neighbours, and colleagues to give and receive support.
- Remind yourself and others that it is normal to have many different feelings as well as “good days” and “bad days” as a natural part of recovery.
- If you continue to have overwhelming negative feelings or behaviours and are unable to carry on with normal responsibilities, seek professional help.
- Use and share information about local support services to help yourself and others.

Parents and caregivers

Kids often react to emergencies differently than adults do because they do not understand what is happening. Younger children might show fear, have tantrums, or experience trouble sleeping. Older ones might feel sad, exhibit aggression, or engage in higher risk behaviours, such as substance use.

Before an emergency

- Talk to children so they know you are prepared to keep them safe.
- Review safety plans before an emergency happens.
- Having a plan will increase children’s confidence and help give them a sense of control.

During an emergency

- Learn what local and virtual mental health care resources are available for children and youth.
- Use and share this information to help yourself and others.
- Stay calm and reassure children that they are safe and cared for.
- Talk to children about what is happening in a way they can understand.
- Keep it simple and appropriate for each child’s age.

- Like adults, children and youth may “fill in” information that is even more frightening when they don’t know the reality of what is happening.
- Listen to and validate their feelings.
- Encourage children and youth to express their emotions, including through creative activities like drawing and dance.
- Maintain family roles and expectations.
- Make clear that you are the adult and that children and youth are not expected to take on additional responsibilities.
- Avoid being overprotective.
- Acknowledge that routines have been disrupted, such as attending school and leisure activities.
- Talk to children and youth about how they will return to a normal routine and what the steps will be (e.g., reopening of roads and schools).

After an emergency

- Increase attention toward children and youth.
- Younger children may benefit from special attention at bedtime.
- Assure children that all emotions are okay.
- Encourage them to discuss how they feel.
- Listen and validate that it is okay to have those feelings.
- Offer comfort and reassurance as needed.
- Encourage them to do things that will keep them engaged and happy.
- Encourage them to express their emotions, including through creative activities such as drawing and dance.
- Set aside time to spend with kids.
- Younger children might need more play time while older ones might feel more in control if they can be involved in planning.
- Seek professional help if a child continues to experience overwhelming negative feelings or demonstrate unexpected behaviours.