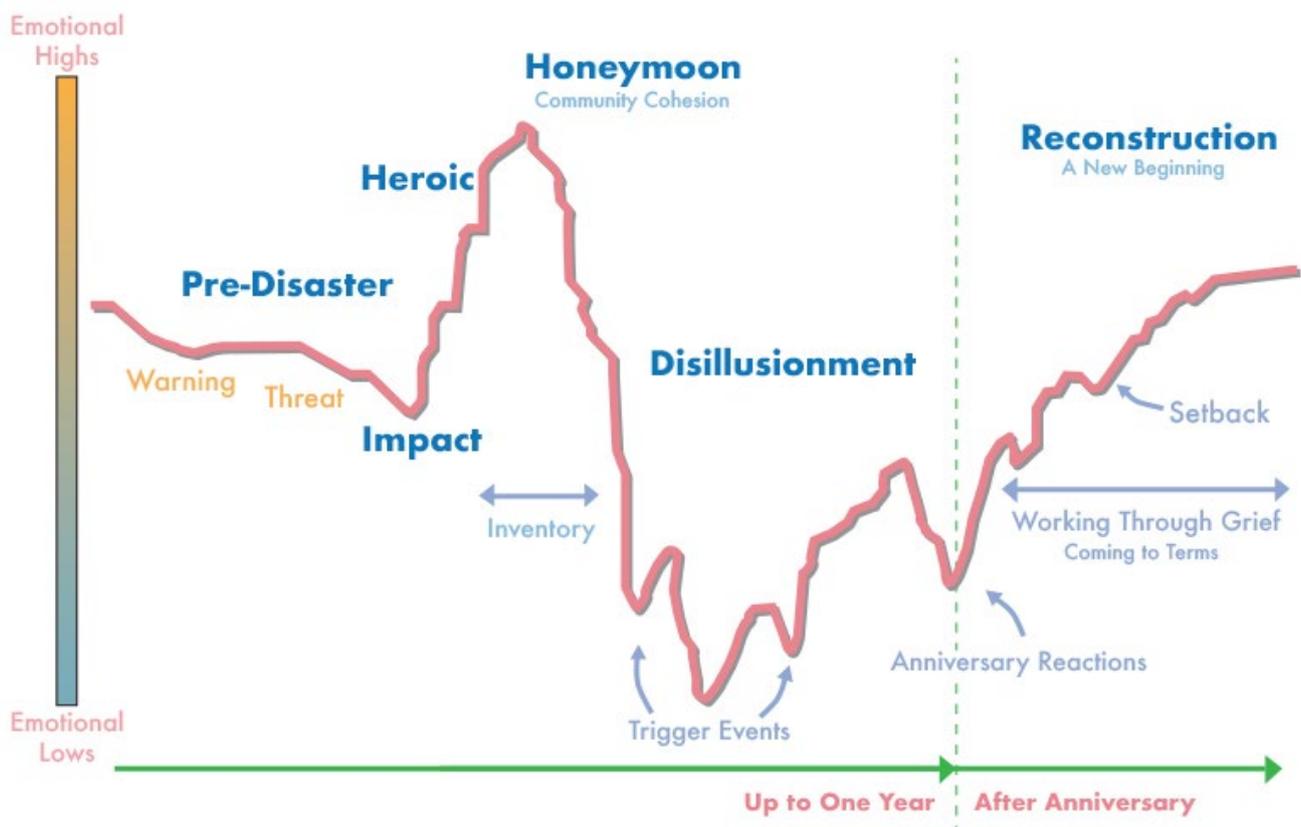


# YOUR GUIDE TO MANAGING A CRISIS

Traumatic events are incredibly challenging to navigate. Emotions run high, information can be sparse and inconsistent, people may be in danger or pain, and it can be very difficult to know how to respond.

Situations like the widespread 2020 bushfires have impacted people throughout Australia and will have ongoing impacts on people's mental health, potentially for years to come. Even those not directly affected will feel the impact of a crisis, and may require additional support.

Following any type of crisis, it's important to consider what individuals and communities are experiencing and what support they may require. Typically, people experiencing a disaster go through six phases which vary in length and intensity depending on the type of disaster, the person's history and vulnerability, the extent of damage, and available resources.



**Figure 1: Phases of a crisis**

Adapted from Zunin & Myers as cited in DeWolfe, D. J., 2000. Training manual for mental health and human service workers in major disasters (2nd ed., HHS Publication No. ADM 90-538). Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services.

## Before you get started: Self-care for people leaders

Supporting employees involved in a crisis can be rewarding but also challenging and stressful. It is not uncommon for people leaders to feel stressed, distressed, tired, overwhelmed, troubled, or frustrated in the course of this work.

Self-care is especially important while supporting others during times of crisis. Focus on:

- Trying to take time to eat, rest and relax—even for short periods
- Trying to keep reasonable working hours so you don't become too exhausted
- Consider dividing the workload among your peers to evenly spread the emotional load
- Consider accessing your internal EAP services if required or specific [Mental Health Support](#) for those affected by events such as bushfires.

## Phase 1: Pre-disaster

This phase is characterised by fear and uncertainty as individuals and communities wait to find out what's happening and make decisions about their activity during the disaster.

Depending on the type of disaster, this phase may only last minutes (e.g. a terrorist attack), or it could last several months (e.g. during fire season).

### How people may be feeling

- Vulnerable
- Lacking security
- Fear of failure
- A sense of loss of control
- Unable to protect themselves or their family
- Guilt or self-blaming



### How you can provide support

- Understand workers may be distracted, and don't expect 100% productivity
- Provide flexibility for workers who need time off or to adjust their hours
- Look for reliable sources of information about the crisis (e.g. from your local emergency services) and provide real-time updates for your team
- Ensure you have all team member contact details, and consider a [phone tree](#) to provide important updates and check on people's safety

### Resources

1. [Looking After You booklet](#)
2. [Mentally Healthy Workplace Policy Tip Sheet](#) to incorporate flexible work hours
3. [Taking care of yourself card](#)
4. *Emotional intelligence for Managers* presentation/[webinar](#), and *Supporting employees to Thrive* presentation/[webinar](#).

## Phase 2: Impact

This impact phase of a crisis is characterised by anxiety, fear and a range of intense emotional reactions as people cope with the initial disaster. This phase is typically short.

### How people are feeling

- Shock
- Panic
- Confusion
- Disbelief
- Self-preservation
- Emotionally numb

### How you can provide support

- Understand workers are likely to be distracted, and don't expect 100% productivity
- Where possible, provide flexibility for workers requiring time off, needing to work remotely, or seeking reduced hours
- Consider providing additional personal leave if that's a practical option for your business
- Re-send details of your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to ensure people know they have someone safe to talk to. Lifeline (phone 13 11 14) is a good option if you don't have an EAP
- Administer **psychological first aid**

## Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a useful first response to use with employees impacted by a crisis or traumatic event. It is most widely used in the *first* hours, days and weeks after an event.

PFA is based on an understanding that people affected by a crisis will experience a range of early reactions (physical, psychological, emotional, behavioural) that may interfere with adaptive coping. These reactions are normal and understandable, and their recovery may be helped by the provision of PFA.

Some people may require further support and mental health interventions to facilitate recovery, but many people recover well on their own, or with the support of compassionate and caring disaster responders, family and friends.

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|--|---|
| <p><b>Look</b></p>    | <p><b>Check for people who require support</b><br/>         Are employees presenting with personal concerns regarding the crisis?<br/>         Are employees demonstrating signs of compromised mental health?<br/> <i>This could include increased absenteeism, presenteeism or performance-related concerns, abnormal emotional outbursts crying/anger.</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Listen</b></p>  | <p><b>Approach people who may need support</b><br/>         Approach employees respectfully and according to cultural norms<br/>         Ask if they require support<br/>         Access a private safe place to talk</p> <p><b>Ask about the people's needs and concerns</b><br/>         Address any obvious needs, for example, if an employee is crying or angry<br/>         Always ask about their needs and concerns – do not assume you know<br/>         Find out what is most important to them at this moment<br/>         Help them work out what their priorities are</p> <p><b>Listen to people and help them to feel calm</b><br/>         Do not pressure the person to talk<br/>         Listen in the event the employee wants to talk about their personal circumstances</p> |

|   |   |
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|   | If they are very distressed, help them to feel calm and try to make sure they are not alone. Connect them with professional support such as your EAP or Lifeline  |
|  <p><b>Link</b></p>  | <p><b>Help people address basic needs and access services</b><br/>Learn what specific needs employees have and try to link them to available assistance</p> <p><b>Help people cope with problems</b><br/>Help identify their most urgent practical needs (i.e. taking a break, transportation home)<br/>Help the person identify support people inside and outside of work<br/>Give practical suggestions for people to meet their own needs (e.g. how to register for community leave if required)</p> <p><b>Give information</b><br/>Find out where to get information and updates pertaining to the crisis<br/>Try to get as much information as you can before approaching people with support<br/>Keep informed through <a href="#">Emergency Services updates</a></p> <p><b>Connect people with loved ones and social support</b><br/>Help people to contact friends or relatives and stay connected<br/>Help employees to access professional support if required through your EAP or specific support services offered by the <a href="#">Australian Government</a></p> |
| <p>Leaders and managers may also benefit from <a href="#">more in-depth training</a> to help recognise and identify early warning signs of compromised mental health, and know how to respond effectively and safely.</p> |   |

#### Additional resources

1. [Peer Support booklet](#)
2. [Preventing suicide in rural areas: resource centre](#)
3. [Prevention of Psychological Injury in the Workplace presentation/webinar](#)

## Phase 3: Heroic

The 'heroic' phase is characterised by communities coming together to support each other and deal with the disaster. There is a level of activity and altruism, and some individuals exhibit adrenaline-induced rescue behaviour. As a result, they might not be assessing risks to themselves and others as well as they normally would.

This phase is short, quickly transitioning into the honeymoon phase.

#### How people are feeling

- Overwhelmed
- Unable to cope
- Supportive of others
- High adrenaline

#### How you can provide support

- Give workers opportunities to connect with each other and discuss the situation and provide support to each other
- Ask Team Leaders to conduct wellbeing checks with their teams
- Provide help seeking information via multiple communication channels for workers to access support when they need it
- Assess if additional resources are required to cover workload

#### Resources

1. [Supporting colleagues through loss and hard times](#)
2. [Building Stronger Teams presentation/webinar](#), and [Workplace Mental Health & Wellbeing Training](#) for Contact Centres/People Leaders

## Phase 4: Honeymoon

The honeymoon period is characterised by a dramatic shift in emotion. Disaster assistance is often readily available and communities bond together. People feel optimistic that things will return to normal quickly.

The honeymoon phase typically lasts a few weeks.

How people are feeling

- Optimistic for the future
- Relief/joy at having survived
- Feeling important and special for receiving aid
- Accepting the magnitude of the disaster

How you can provide support

- Check in with team members returning to work following the crisis, and adjust their workload and hours where possible/required
- Consider a morning tea or similar positive gathering to rebuild a sense of community and connectedness

Resources

1. [Managing Bereavement, Grief and Loss booklets for Colleagues, Managers & Individuals](#)
2. *Managing Bereavement, Grief and Loss* presentation/[webinar](#), *Building Resilience of SME Owners* presentation/[webinar](#)



## Phase 5: Disillusionment

The disillusionment stage is characterised by the realisation of the limits of disaster assistance. The gap between need and the assistance provided can lead to feelings of abandonment. Optimism becomes disillusionment and stress from the situation takes a toll.

There may be an increased demand for support services as individuals and communities become ready to accept support.

This phase can last months or even years. It is often extended by one or more trigger events, such as the anniversary of the disaster.

How people are feeling

- Stress
- Frustration and resentment towards government
- Uncertainty and fear
- Anger

- Loss of appetite
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Withdrawal
- Loss of concentration
- Inability to make decisions
- Aggression such as domestic violence
- Increased alcohol/drug use

How you can provide support

- Provide help seeking information on all communications for people to access support when they need it
- Don't expect productivity to be 100%
- Give workers the opportunity to talk to each other

Resources

1. [Suicide and mental illness language guide](#)
2. *Managing Stress & Self-Care* training workshops, *The Importance of Sleep* [webinar](#)/presentation, *Contact Centre* [Training](#) – Person Centred Communication

## Phase 6: Reconstruction / recovery

This phase is characterised by a feeling of recovery. Individuals and communities accept their situation. They begin to rebuild their lives and adjust to a new “normal” while continuing to grieve losses. It often begins around the anniversary of the disaster and may continue for years.

### How people are feeling

- Normal level of functioning
- Wellbeing is restored
- Realistic memories of the experience are developed

### How you can provide support

- Continue to focus on workers' mental health and wellbeing through ongoing promotion of positive mental health strategies
- Foster opportunities for connection and community, such as team get-togethers over a meal or coffee, trivia competitions, lunchtime walks, or a visit by a registered therapy dog

### Resources

1. *5 Ways to Wellbeing* presentation/webinar, *Promoting Positive Mental Health in the Workplace* presentation/[webinar](#), [Workplace Mental Health Introduction Training](#)

**[Contact SuperFriend](#) or [check out these additional resources](#) if you need extra help or targeted training to support your people.**



### References

*Psychological First Aid: An Australian Guide* was developed by the Australian Red Cross and the Australian Psychological Society. <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/23276bd8-a627-48fe-87c2-5bc6b6b61eec/Psychological-First-Aid-An-Australian-Guide.pdf.aspx>

ACPMH 2009, *Community Recovery Following Disaster: Training for Community Support People – Workshop Guide and Resource*, Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health & beyondblue, Melbourne, Australia.