

SUPPORTING CUSTOMERS FOLLOWING A NATURAL DISASTER



Natural disasters are considered traumatic events. They are powerful and upsetting incidents which can impact your daily life.

It's hard not to be upset by rolling media coverage of an unfolding tragedy.

People who are either directly, or indirectly, exposed to a natural disaster are likely to experience increased feelings of vulnerability, despair, helplessness and hopelessness. It can become hard to feel safe in what now feels like an unsafe environment.

Common reactions

Many people have strong reactions following their experience of a traumatic event. For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks.

For some, the symptoms may last longer and be more severe. These symptoms may be as a result of several factors including the nature of the traumatic event, the level of available support, previous and current life stress, personality, and coping mechanisms.

Symptoms include:

- **PHYSICAL:** Excessive alertness, fatigue/exhaustion, being easily startled, disturbed sleep and general aches and pains.
- **COGNITIVE (THOUGHTS):** Intrusive thoughts and memories of the event, visual flashbacks of the event, nightmares, poor concentration and memory, disorientation and confusion.
- **BEHAVIOURAL:** Avoidance of places or activities that are reminders of the event, social withdrawal and isolation and loss of interest in normal activities.
- **EMOTIONAL:** Fear, numbness and detachment, depression, guilt, anger and irritability, anxiety and panic.

The symptoms described above are normal reactions to trauma. Although these symptoms can be distressing, they are part of the natural healing process of adjusting to a very powerful event, making some sense out of what happened, and putting it into perspective.

What most distressed customers want or need

When dealing with customers in distress, it's easy to become overwhelmed and react to their emotions. However, it's important to remember that most people in distress want the following things:

- To be heard.
- To be treated respectfully.
- To get immediate action.
- To gain certainty and understanding.

How to support distressed customers

How we engage with distressed customers has a significant impact on our own wellbeing as well as theirs. It is important to keep in mind we may not be aware of a customer's circumstances, and all the factors contributing to their distress. When supporting a customer in distress it's important to:

- Remain calm and speak calmly.
- Acknowledge their feelings and distress (e.g. "it must be difficult").
- Display active listening (keep eye contact, nod occasionally, appropriate facial expressions) and empathy.
- Focus on what they are saying, and less how they are saying it.
- Try to bring the discussion back to the reason for their enquiry and why they made contact in the first place ("I can hear that you're upset, how can I best help you today").
- Look to contain conversations with customers. You don't need extensive details about circumstances to be able to assist.

- If someone becomes highly distressed, pause the conversation, and help calm them (offer them a seat, glass of water, a moment to gather themselves).
- Acknowledge their distress and upset.
- Ask if they're able to continue the conversation or agree to follow up with them at a later time.
- Ensure they have support they can connect in with.
- Encourage the customer to connect into their local community-based supports and provide numbers for helplines (e.g. Red Cross, Lifeline, BeyondBlue or their GP).

Looking after yourself by practising self-care

Hearing of other people's distress and experiencing their emotions can have an impact on your own mental health. It is important to remember feelings and symptoms we experience can change, and while people don't forget what's happened, the body and mind will recover from the shock. By prioritising your wellbeing, you are best placed to look after yourself while also supporting customers.

There are several things you can do to look after yourself:

- Limit exposure to media and footage of the incident.
- Get enough sleep, exercise regularly and eat well.
- Regularly check-in with colleagues and managers.
- Contact Benestar for support or access a suite of health and wellbeing resources on the BeneHub website or app.
- Avoid using drugs and alcohol to cope.
- Spend time with family, friends or connect in with community events; social connectedness plays an important role in managing your psychological resilience.

NEED HELP?

The Benestar team are always here to help you. For free, confidential coaching and support please call us on:

Australia: 1300 360 364

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