

Promoting Recovery and Well-Being Following Tropical Cyclone Debbie

By David Younger, Clinical & Consultant Psychologist

Severe weather events are an ever present component of Australia's landscape and culture. It is important to understand the potential effects of these weather events, both positive and negative, on people and the communities in which they live. During the recent community sessions in Queensland following tropical cyclone Debbie, I suggested that the promotion of resilience and well-being can be represented by four key words; Effects, Recovery, Stress, and Strategies. A brief summary of each of these follows.

1. **Effects:** Significant weather events frequently result in a community coming together in a very positive way to face the threat. People often talk about the strengthening of relationships, the formation of new relationships, and feeling more connected to their community than previously. But there are some unhelpful side effects that we should remain aware of
 - **Having a frightening experience:** some people have a very frightening experience and whilst most people's high stress levels come down after the threat has passed, for some this will unfortunately not occur.
 - **Loss:** this includes loss of property such as furnishings or even a home but loss can also include work, income, friendships, and a landscape.
 - **Disruption:** 'normal' day to life is held together by routines and when a severe weather event occurs there is usually a protracted period of disruption. For example, needing to relocate to a temporary home or having to take the children to a different school. In time this disruption can cause stress levels to increase eventually leading to tiredness and irritability amongst other things.
2. **Recovery:** What we have noticed following natural events and disasters is that many people assume the aim of recovery is to 'get everything back to the way it was' prior to the event. Unfortunately this is not always possible and for some people this will be more achievable than for others. A new home built to replace a home burnt in a bushfire will never be the same as the old home. It may well be a new but it will not be the same. After flooding floorboards may twist or doors may not close properly. This will be a permanent difference as well. Even friendships can change.

One suggestion that seems helpful is to consider recovery as involving a flexible ability to adapt to things that are often outside of our control. It is important to try to come to terms with the possibility that recovery and the disruption it brings may continue for some time. But also remember that community is strongest when people come together, are respectful of one another's different experiences, and then support each other positively.

3. **Stress:** Low levels of stress can be helpful in certain situations (eg., sitting a driving test and being able to concentrate for the whole test) but when stress levels are too high or go for too long there can be a wide range of negative effects. In regards to recovery, there are two main types of stress that we are particularly interested in:

- **Adrenalin – ‘survival mode’:** this is the high state of stress that gets activated, often referred to as the ‘fight or flight alarm’ that helps us to get through and survive a very threatening experience such as a flood or bushfire
- **Cortisol – ‘endurance mode’:** this is the state of stress that comes further down the track, after the threat has passed and when the hard work of certain aspects of recovery become obvious. Cortisol is a hormone that gives us access to energy we would not otherwise gain access to. It helps us to ‘keep going’.

But each of these types of stress is not helpful or healthy in the long term. It is important to remain aware of your stress levels and to keep them in check as best you can. Many people after natural disasters talk about having spent too much time working to ‘get things back to normal’ without taking enough time to rest and recuperate. It is extremely important to look after yourself and those around you.

4. Strategies: below are some key suggestions that people and communities have found helpful.

- **General:** try not to lose sight of the bigger picture and keep attention on all of the other aspects of life; manage the ‘disruption’, don’t let it take over; find a speed for recovery that is right for you eg., plan to run a marathon versus a sprint.
- **Community:** be respectful of each other’s experience, some people may be suffering but don’t want to show it; draw on each other strengths and resources by sharing information about what works and is helpful; if you are not sure of something don’t be afraid to ask as there is a lot of assistance available.
- **Individual:** keep a look out for signs of stress eg., disturbed sleep, irritability, anger, substance use, arguments with family or friends; try to identify a stressor and then develop a solution; rest and recreation – always make time for fun and positive experiences.

Effects, Recovery, Stress and Strategies. Remembering these key words will hopefully be of benefit.

Kind Regards, David Younger