



# NATURAL DISASTER OR EMERGENCY

How to help someone doing it tough

MATESHIP  
**manual**

**RUOK?**<sup>®</sup>  
A conversation could change a life.



**People need to understand that things like flood, bushfire and other disasters happen on top of our existing worries and troubles. We've been living with drought conditions for years – then this happens and it's just so much to deal with.**

– Survivor, Australian drought and bushfires



Natural disasters and emergencies disrupt lives and routines. When things around us change, we change too – and what that means for us emotionally is different for everyone.

The environmental impact of the event might be immediate, as it is with flood or bushfire, but it might also develop over time, as it does with drought. Depending on what people are already dealing with in their lives, the emotional impact can be difficult for people to cope with both in the short and longer term. Some people may not experience distress until long after an event.

If someone you know – a family member, friend, neighbour or workmate – is doing it tough, they won't always tell you. Sometimes the signs that they're not OK won't be obvious.

It's up to us to trust our gut instinct and ask someone who may be struggling 'are you OK?'

## **It is always better to ask than not ask.**

By asking and listening, you can help those you care about feel more supported and connected.

You can be the one to make that difference if you follow some simple steps.





# You have what it takes to make a difference

In times of emergency, there are many problems that need attention. On top of daily life stress, people often have to deal with challenges like personal safety, temporary housing and how to manage ongoing health concerns or disability requirements in uncertain times.

But how do you know when it is getting too much for someone and they're not doing so well mentally?

## What are the signs you should look for?

This is where the strength of community can help. You may not be the only one who has noticed something isn't quite right with someone you know. It may be helpful to talk with another person you trust so you can sense check your gut feeling. It might also be helpful to enlist support for a broader community discussion about how people are feeling. If someone is struggling it might help them to realise they are not alone.

If someone in your world is not joining in group conversations as much as usual, or they are isolating themselves physically in times when communities are gathering together, don't ignore it.

**Remember, signs that someone is struggling will be different for everyone.**

# It's time to ask R U OK? if you notice a change, no matter how small

## What are they SAYING?

### Do they sound:

- Confused or irrational
- Angry or irritable
- Unable to switch off
- Concerned they're a burden
- Lonely or lacking self-esteem
- Concerned they're trapped or in pain
- Excessively worried or fearful
- Emotionally numb and disinterested

## What are they DOING?

### Are they:

- Experiencing mood swings
- Withdrawing
- Losing interest in what they used to love
- Unable to concentrate
- Behaving recklessly
- Drinking excessively
- Taking illicit drugs or too much medication
- Taking less care with appearance and personal hygiene
- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Eating too much or not much at all
- Experiencing heart palpitations or restlessness
- Jittery or afraid

## What's going on in their LIFE?

### Have they experienced:

- Relationship issues
- Major health issues
- Work pressure or constant stress
- Financial difficulty
- Loss of someone or something they care about



**Taking the pressure off someone by assisting them in a physical or practical way may allow them to have the energy and time to actually deal with/face the difficulties they are experiencing**

– Survivor, Australian bushfires



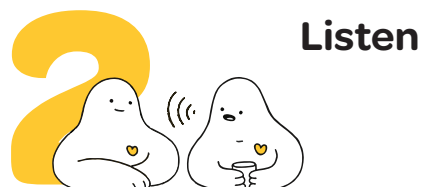
In times of emergency or stressful events, offers of practical help and a sense of community may be just what someone needs to help them to cope.

In the short term after a disaster, lending a hand with repairs and physical work is a great way to support someone you're worried about.

You could also drop off a meal or help them with an errand.

Helping out with practical tasks can also lower stress levels and is an opportunity for you to have a chat and encourage them to open up about how they're feeling.

## Having the conversation



## How to ask R U OK?



It can be confronting to start the conversation with someone you're worried about. Chances are, if you've seen signs they might be struggling they're likely to say they're not OK. And that's OK because you have what it takes to support them.

It's really important that before you ask someone if they're OK you make sure you're OK, that you're in the right headspace and have time for the conversation.

When you're ready there are four simple steps you can follow and the first step is to ask R U OK?

When you have a conversation, it can be helpful to let them know what changes you've noticed. For example you might phrase it something like this: "We missed you in town at the last meeting, how are things going?"

You can also acknowledge that it's a difficult time for everyone, with a conversation opener such as, "So how are you doing with everything that's going on right now?"



### Ideas of ways to connect

If they don't live with you, find a reason to go and see them.

- Drop in for a cuppa or arrange a video chat over morning tea
- Ask them if they can give you a hand with something, either in person or advice over the phone
- Pick your moment. If they can't talk when you approach them, organise another time to try again.



Sometimes listening can be all that's needed. Giving someone a chance to vent and acknowledge that things are tough right now can make all the difference. You won't always have the answers or be able to provide advice to the person. In fact, sometimes it's better not to give advice.

Be prepared to listen without trying to solve their problems. Have an open mind.

Don't rush or interrupt. Let them speak in their own time.

Let them know you're asking because you're concerned and that no matter what's happening around you both, you have the time to listen.

Reassure them that you've listened by repeating back (in your own words) what they've told you and check that you have understood clearly.

Here are some things you could say:

- "I'm worried about you."
- "Sometimes talking about it can really help."

- "It sounds like you're doing it tough, talk to me about how you're feeling."
- "Everyone has to take a break, I'll make us a cuppa/let's get something to eat."

For those living through a natural disaster or emergency, different reactions and emotions may come up as they recount their story. Some people might feel distressed or exasperated about sharing everything that is going on, particularly when they've had to tell their story over and over again to first responders, support agencies and family.

If they need time to think, sit patiently with the silence. Be ready for knock backs, you might have to try again several times before they open up. If someone doesn't want to share the details with you there might be someone else you can involve who they'd be more comfortable with. It can also be helpful to reassure them that what they are feeling is normal.

- "It's OK to feel like this, you've been through a lot."
- "You don't have to tell me everything, perhaps just start with what's upsetting you right now."
- "It's normal to be up and down over a long period of time."
- "If you don't want to talk now, that's OK, I'll come back again this afternoon/tomorrow."



**"One of the hardest things has been having to tell and retell my story."**

– Survivor, Australian bushfires





## Encourage action

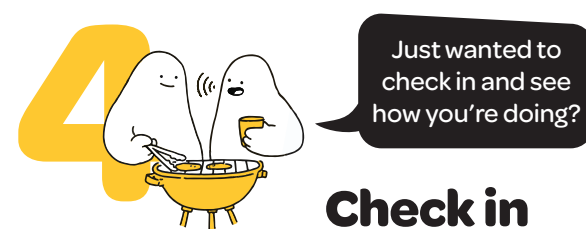
It's important to recognise when problems are too big for you to solve. Helping them find professional support is important and can be a relief for someone when they have a lot on their mind.

## How do I know someone needs professional support?

If there have been signs that someone you care about has been struggling (refer to page 5), encourage them to seek support from a trusted healthcare professional like a GP or a local health service. Don't assume they will get better without help or that they will seek help on their own.

Here are some things you might say to them:

- "What do you need from me? How can I help?"
- "What would be a good first step we can take?"
- "Where do you think we can go from here?"
- "What's something you can do for yourself right now? Something that's enjoyable or relaxing."
- "When I was going through a difficult time, I tried (insert your example). You might find it useful too."
- "Have you thought about going to see the doctor?"
- "If you don't want to see your local doctor, is there someone else you would prefer to talk to?"
- "I have some numbers for some services that might help, we can call them together if you like."



## Check in

It's really important to follow up in a few days to see how the person is doing. This shows them that you genuinely care and want to help.

Ask if they've found a way to manage the situation. If they haven't done anything, don't judge them. For now, they might just need someone to lend a listening ear.

Here is what you could say:

- "I've been thinking of you and wanted to know how you've been going since we last chatted."
- "How did you go speaking to the doc?"
- "Did you end up making an appointment?"
- "Did you call any of the numbers I gave you?"

If they've had a bad experience with a helpline or doctor, encourage them to keep trying.

- "Would it be useful if we tried some other options to help you get through this?"

Pop a reminder in your diary to drop in or call them in a couple of weeks. If they're really struggling, follow up with them sooner.

Stay in touch and be there for them. Genuine care and concern can make a real difference.



## Managing emotional reactions during a conversation

Remember that recovering from a natural disaster or emergency situation might take months and even years so it's important to keep checking in after the immediate danger has passed.

Smells, sights and sounds can trigger emotional distress so be alert to any signs and check in when you notice a change, no matter how small.

Understand that sometimes it takes time for someone to admit they need help. Stick with them and know that your support means a lot.



**The heavy rains took me straight back to years ago when our house was destroyed in floods. I felt myself getting those panicky and anxious feelings all over again which made it really hard to make rational decisions about what my family needed today.**

– Survivor, Australian floods



Sometimes during an R U OK? conversation the person might become emotional, particularly if they have experienced a natural disaster or emergency.

Here are some things you can do to make it a little less awkward and ease the pressure:

- Be prepared.
- Recognise their reaction might be in response to a range of circumstances - some of which you might not know about.
- Allow the person to fully express their emotions (i.e. let off steam) and reassure them by actively listening to all they say.
- Deal with the emotions first, you can discuss the issues more rationally once their emotions are managed.
- Being a good listener is one of the best things you can do for someone when they are distressed.
- Manage your own emotions by staying calm and not taking things personally.

# How do I deal with sadness?

Sad or tragic incidents are often difficult to deal with because we empathise with the person and feel helpless when we cannot take away their sadness or pain.

If someone begins to cry, sit quietly and allow them to cry. Lowering your eyes can minimise their discomfort.

You could add, "I'm going to sit here with you and when you're ready we can keep talking".

If you anticipate this response, it can help to have tissues handy.

Use lots of empathetic phrases, such as "It sounds like you're juggling a few things at the moment" or "I understand this must be challenging for you right now".

Make sure you're comfortable with any silence in the conversation. Know that silence gives them permission to keep talking and tell you more.

Encourage them to access appropriate support. That might include speaking to family, friends or a trusted health professional like their local doctor.



# How do I deal with anger? @#%!

If someone is expressing anger in answer to your question, you can respond with: "I can see this has upset you. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me what I need to know".

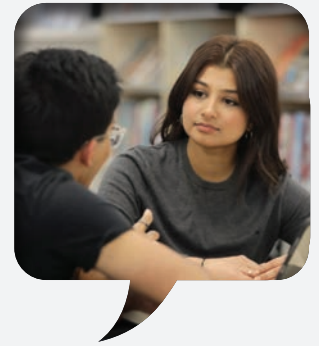
Allow them to identify all the factors they feel are contributing to their anger.

You might encourage them by adding "I understand that (...) is a problem. What else is causing you concern?".

Be patient and prepared to listen to them talk about everything that's adding to their frustration.

To keep the conversation on track and to reassure them you're interested in all they have to say, try reflecting back what they have said. You could say, "So the thing that's really upsetting you is (...) Is that right?".

If they feel they have been wronged or treated unfairly you are unlikely to persuade them otherwise in this conversation. It's more constructive to listen to all they have to say and provide resources or, if appropriate, connect them with formal channels where their specific complaints can be heard.



# How do I deal with anxiety?

Speak in short, clear sentences while still showing concern and care.

If you anticipate an anxious response, use your preparation time to think about the right place and time for the conversation.

Stay calm. This is best displayed through deep, slow breathing, a lower tone of voice and evenly paced speech.

# Worried about their immediate safety?

If you think someone is having thoughts of suicide, don't be afraid to ask them if they are. Asking the question does not lead to suicide.

It's not an easy question to ask, so if you don't feel confident, a good first step is to call a crisis helpline to seek some immediate advice – see page 18 for a list of available services.

## How do I ask?

- "People in situations like this may be thinking about suicide. Are you having thoughts about killing yourself?"

If they say yes, the most important things for you to do are to:

- 1 keep them safe – do not leave them alone
- 2 get them some immediate professional help.

To keep them safe, remove any dangerous items from their physical location, particularly if they have mentioned a suicide plan.

If they share details of their plan with you, don't agree to keep these or their suicidal thoughts a secret.

Keep talking and listening to them. Be positive about the role professionals can play in helping them through tough times. You can say things like:

- "I think it's time to link in with someone who can support you. I can help you find the right person to talk to."
- "You're not alone. We can figure this out together."
- "Who's a person you trust? I would like to call them so we can both help."

## Getting them to professional help can start with any of these options:

- Calling a crisis support line together.
- Going with them to an Emergency Department.
- Going with them to a community centre or recovery centre.
- Taking them somewhere that feels safe to them but where they won't be alone.



# Support is available

**If you are concerned for your safety or the safety of others, seek immediate assistance by calling Triple Zero (000).**

If you're finding life tough or need some extra support, it can help to talk about how you're feeling with someone you trust.

Family and friends can also call the services below for advice and assistance on how to support someone who is struggling with life.

## **Lifeline (24/7)**

13 11 14

[lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)

## **Suicide Call Back Service (24/7)**

1300 659 467

[suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

## **Beyond Blue (24/7)**

1300 224 636

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

## **Kids Helpline (24/7)**

(for ages 5-25)

1800 55 1 800

[kidshelp.com.au](http://kidshelp.com.au)

## **13 YARN (24/7)**

13 92 76

[13yarn.org.au](http://13yarn.org.au)

Support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

## **Mensline (24/7)**

1300 78 99 78

[mensline.org.au](http://mensline.org.au)

## **QLife**

1800 184 527

[qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au)

Anonymous and free LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral

## **Headspace**

(for ages 12-25)

1800 650 890

[headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au)

## **Australian Red Cross**

[redcross.org.au/emergencies](http://redcross.org.au/emergencies)

Practical tips for support when there's a crisis or emergency

## **Rural Financial Counselling Service**

1800 686 175

## **Phoenix Australia Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health**

[phoenixaustralia.org/recovery](http://phoenixaustralia.org/recovery)

## **View contacts for national helplines and services at**

[ruok.org.au/findhelp](http://ruok.org.au/findhelp)



**RUOK?**<sup>®</sup>

A conversation could change a life.

**[ruok.org.au](https://ruok.org.au)**

This resource was informed by lived experience perspectives in addition to clinical and research expertise, using trauma informed thinking. It was developed in collaboration with the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Research Group, University of South Australia.