



General practice fact sheet

18 January 2010

Flooding and its impact on mental health

Evidence based summary of impact of flooding in relation to mental health

The present evidence suggests that acute traumatic stress arising from floods is a normal coping strategy linked to a threat of loss of life, possessions or livelihood. In the majority of cases this acute traumatic stress subsides when normal cognitive function recognises that conditions of safety have been established. However, for a minority of people involved in floods and other traumatic events, they may experience chronic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In addition, survivors of floods may maintain symptoms of emotion and stress especially when the realisation of major financial loss replaces the threat of loss of life. It is also likely that survivors who have pre-existing mental health problems may experience exacerbation of these issues.

GPs have been reported to be the most consulted group of health care professionals for people with mental illness, with 71 percent of patients in Australia initially presenting to their GP. Thus, it is likely that GPs are the most likely health professionals consulted by people who have been affected by the recent floods and are experiencing some difficulties with their mental health.

Source: <http://www.jpqmonline.com/text.asp?2006/52/2/121/25157>. Last accessed 14.1.2011.

Information and resources to help with the impact of flood in relation to mental health

1. Trauma and response to natural disasters

1.1 Australian Psychological Society

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has a range of information, guidelines and resources that people can access who have been affected or are working with communities affected by natural disasters. These resources can be found on their website at www.psychology.org.au.

The APS has developed a disaster web-portal predominantly for health professionals working with people affected by disasters. The aim of the web-portal is to provide valuable resources for health professionals working with individuals threatened by or affected by natural disasters. These resources focus on preparedness, response and recovery and there is also a dedicated information section for the general public. The web-portal address is www.psid.org.au.

1.2 Australian Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health

The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health at the University of Melbourne undertakes world class trauma related research, policy advice, service development and education. This innovative service helps organisations and health professionals who work with people affected by traumatic events. This organisation has a section on its website at www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au that provides health professionals with resources aimed at helping people who have been affected by traumatic experiences. A brief primary care screening measure for PTSD is located in the health professional section of this website.

The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health has also undertaken a significant amount of work with the Australian Defense Force in relation to PTSD. There is some specific support information for military personnel on their website. In addition, it is worth noting that ambulance and rescue services may have internal processes and guidelines to help their front line workers recognise the signs and symptoms of PTSD.

1.3 The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry (RANZCP) have a range of mental health practice guidelines on their website which can be accessed by visiting www.ranzcp.org/resources/clinical-practice-guidelines.html.

In addition, the RANZCP have a special interest group on trauma, which focuses on PTSD.



General practice fact sheet

1.3 Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network

This network aims to promote understanding of child and adolescent trauma, loss and grief. This network contains information for practitioners/service providers, policy makers/managers, educators/trainers, researchers, child and family advocates, and parents, other caregivers, young people and interested member of the community. Its content is informed by a panel of experts in the fields of child and adolescent trauma, loss and grief. Information and resources can be found at the website at www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au.

2. Telephone counseling and help lines for patients

2.1 Lifeline Australia

Lifeline Australia provides access to free and confidential crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services. Lifeline Australia can be contacted on **13 11 14** or access their website www.lifeline.org.au for further information. A relevant toolkit entitled coping with loss and change in a community after a natural disaster can be found on their website.

2.2 Kids Help Line

Kids Help Line is a free and confidential, telephone service counselling service for 4 to 25 year olds in Australia. To access Kids Help Line ring **1800 55 1800** or visited the website www.kidshelp.com.au.

2.3 Mensline Australia

MensLine Australia is the national telephone support, information and referral service for men with family and relationship concerns. The service is available from anywhere in Australia for the cost of a local call, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on **1800 55 1800**. The service also offers support to men who are experiencing psychosocial crisis from trauma. A range of information and can be accessed on the website at www.menslineaus.org.au.

2.4 Suicide Call Back Service

Provides crisis counseling to people at risk of suicide, people who are caring for someone who is at risk of suicide and those who are bereaved by suicide, 24 hours per day 7 days a week. To access this service please call **1300 659 467** or access the website at www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au.

2.5 *beyondblue*

beyondblue is a national organisation that has a range of information and resources associated with depression and anxiety. *Beyondblue* has an information line, **1300 78 9978**, which provides members of the public with access to information, resources and referral information. *beyondblue* also has a dedicated flood resources and information page on their website: www.beyondblue.org.au.

2.6 Sane Australia

Sane Australia provides a range of information, resources and fact sheets on the topic of mental health. Sane Australia also has a mental health help line and patients can access this service by calling **1800 18 7263**. Sane Australia can also be contacted via there website at: www.sane.org.au.

2.7 Centrelink social workers

Centrelink social workers are available to help people in Centrelink Customer Service Centres or over the telephone through the Centrelink Call Centre. Centrelink social workers can help people in vulnerable situations in the following ways.

- Provide counseling and support to Centrelink customers with difficult personal or family issues.
- Provide information about, or refer patients to community support, and welfare services.
- Help with claims for payments from Centrelink.

Patients can organise an appointment with a social worker by calling **13 17 94**.

3. Mental health services directly involving general practitioners

3.1 Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS)

ATAPS enables GPs under the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care (BOiMHC) program to refer patients to allied health professionals who deliver focused psychological strategies. The Federal Government has announced that they will



The Royal Australian
College of General
Practitioners

General practice fact sheet

increase the funding to ATAPS and associated support services by an additional \$1.3 million for flood affected communities. This additional funding will provide psychological services at no or low cost to affected patients and will complement emergency and specialist mental health services provided by the Queensland Government.

Divisions of general practice act as fund holders for the ATAPS program. The Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) is the national body that represents 111 divisions of general practice. The AGPN provides an online Network Directory on its website at www.agpn.com.au which allows searches using maps or a search interface to obtain information on divisions of general practices.

The RACGP has been informed by Department of Health and Ageing that the normal rules for accessing ATAPS have been suspended in flood affected areas, allowing unlimited assistance to patients.

3.2 Better Access to Mental Health Care Initiative.

All GPs can refer their patients via a mental health treatment plan under the Better Access program to allied mental health professionals (clinical psychologists, generalist psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists) and GP providers of Focused Psychological Strategies (FPS) for psychological treatments. These professionals must be registered with Medicare Australia via their peak bodies to enable Medicare rebates for providing these services on appropriate referral. This Medicare based mental health service is already available to flood impacted patients through existing funding arrangements. For further information on the Better Access to Mental Health Care Initiative please contact the General practice Mental Health Standards Collaboration (GPMHSC) on **03 8699 0554**. For further information regarding the GPMHSC people access the website at www.racgp.org.au/gpmhsc.

3.3 GP Psych Support

The GP Psych Support (GPPS) Service offers free advice to all GPs across Australia, on their patients' mental health matters. GPs can put in a patient enquiry by telephone (**1800 20 0588**), facsimile (**1800 01 2422**) or the secure website at www.psychsupport.com.au, and a GPPS psychiatrist will respond to their enquiry within 24 hours. GPPS Psychiatrists cover the whole age spectrum, from child to geriatric and they are also experienced drug and alcohol specialists. For further information or to register, visit www.psychsupport.com.au or phone **1800 20 0588**. Importantly, the GPPS Service can advise GPs on how best to manage their patients who may have been traumatised by the recent flood disaster. The GPPS Service is facilitated by the RACGP.

4. Useful mental health resources for GPs needing support

4.1 GP Support Program

To access counselling for traumatic events or crisis situations call **1800 45 1138** (24hours/7 days a week). For further information on the GP Support Program, visit www.racgp.org.au.

4.2 *beyondblue*

beyondblue has a Doctors' Mental Health Program. The aim of the *beyondblue* Doctors' Mental Health Program (bbDMHP) is to address the prevalence of depression and anxiety in Australian medical students and doctors. Visit www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=4.1262.

4.3 Bush Support Line

The Bush Support Line provides confidential counselling to remote health workers (24-hour service). The focus is prevention and recovery. Visit <http://bss.crana.org.au/34-bush-support-services.html> or call **1800 80 5391**.