

National disaster recovery principle 2: Recognise complexity

Speed read

- Successful recovery is responsive to the complex and dynamic nature of both emergencies and the community.
- Disasters lead to a range of effects and impacts that require a variety of approaches; they can also leave long-term legacies.
- Affected individuals and communities have diverse needs, wants, values and expectations. These can evolve rapidly and may create tensions.

Key points

Previous experience of disaster can influence recovery. Sometimes, prior experience of disaster increases the resilience of the community because they've built relationships and networks that carry through from one event to the next. At other times, for example when recovery has been poorly managed, the legacy of prior disaster experience may be a sense of being overwhelmed and exhausted, reduced levels of trust and community cohesion, or negative views and relationships with recovery agencies, programs and services.

After an event there is predictable human behaviour. All emergencies expose people to a range of stressors and there is a broad range of responses. If disaster-affected people understand the types of experiences and emotions they may experience throughout their recovery process, they can build a stronger understanding that what they are experiencing is not unusual but is a typical response to a post-disaster situation.

There are myths when it comes to recovery. There are a range of common myths about what is important and helpful to communities following a disaster. These myths are often compounded and reinforced by the highly stressful, complex and emotionally charged environment of disaster recovery.

Duration of the disaster and the recovery can affect recovery. Disasters vary in their scale and intensity, as well as their level of impact. The phases and time it takes to recover last much longer than many people anticipate, often by months and even years

Relocation of people can have implications in recovery. The complexity of a disaster can also be influenced by whether people are able to return permanently to their homes once the initial impacts have been managed. This can result in a loss of friendships and relationships, routines and community networks at the very time when these things would be of most benefit.

Recovery occurs within the political arena. The formal political environment, organisational politics and the way the media and communities talk about and frame the experience can all influence how recovery is managed.

Donations and appeals happen throughout the recovery phase. Local authorities, non-government organisations or the media may start public appeals in a coordinated or uncoordinated way. Community appeal funds can start up (such as a mayoral fund appeal or funds coordinated by religious, regional, philanthropic, community foundations or humanitarian agencies for large-scale emergencies). It is highly important to be consistent and transparent about how appeal funds or donated goods are being distributed.

Health and wellbeing is important in recovery. The number of deaths and serious injuries following a disaster are often reported, but the longer-term health impacts of a disaster event are often undocumented. People affected by the disaster may need a wide range of health services, and people with pre-existing health needs may require extra help from service providers. This level of servicing can be difficult if medical staff and infrastructure have also been impacted by the disaster.

Physical health impacts include: Injuries and illness as a result of the hazard, changes to the environment as a result of the disaster, physical symptoms of psychological stress, disruptions to and reductions in health care supports or services as a result of the disaster.

Mental health and psychosocial impacts: Recovery workers need to be attuned to the mental health needs of individuals in the disaster affected community, as mental health pressures vary at different stages of the recovery journey. Children and adolescents may have distinctly different or unique experiences of disasters depending on how old they are. Following a disaster people may become disconnected from their usual support systems, and survivors with shared experiences may form new groups and friendships. In some cases, response, relief and recovery workers live in the affected community and may be dealing simultaneously with their own personal losses and uncertainty about the safety of their families, homes and livelihoods.

In recovery there can also be post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth refers to people's positive experiences after traumatic events – appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength, relating to others and spiritual change. At a community level, bonds between people can be strengthened by sharing an intense experience together.

Take action

- Put up the [National Principles for Disaster Recovery poster](https://bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciplesPoster) in your office or recovery centre (bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciplesPoster)
- Use the [Checklist: Planning for recovery pre-event – applying the principles](https://bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciples) (SRRG 2018) (bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciples)
- Use the [Checklist: Applying the principles post-disaster](https://bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciples) (SRRG 2018) (bit.ly/RecoveryPrinciples)

More information

- [Community Recovery Handbook](#) (AIDR 2018)
- [National Principles for Disaster Recovery on the Knowledge Hub](#)
- [Australian Red Cross: Recover from disasters resources](#)
- [Phoenix Australia: Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health](#)