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Mental health tsunami to follow devastating floods

Catastrophic weather devastating large parts of Australia, will bring a tsunami of mental health needs as people face the ruin of floods coupled with a looming Federal Government cut to Medicare Rebates for telehealth psychology services.

Australian Clinical Psychology Association President Prof. Caroline Hunt said mass evacuations, loss of business and homes, separation from community, school closures and dwindling supplies in some flood-ravaged towns were all significant, high stress events which were affecting tens of thousands of people.

“We are seeing unprecedented scenes of disaster across NSW and the mental health effects are very real for the scores of people cut off from their homes, livelihoods and community,” Prof Caroline Hunt said.

“Whether you are drastically impacted and among the potential 30,000 evacuees or simply affected by the ongoing, devastating coverage it is important to reach out for help and support as needed from a trusted mental health professional. The mental health fallout from the floods is going to be felt for months and maybe years to come. Right now, the focus is on getting everyone to safety but there is a long road ahead for those individuals and communities who need to rebuild.”

Prof Hunt said it could be expected people in the path of the floods would be feeling panic and distress right now. However, ongoing signs and symptoms of distress including a general pre-occupation with events, difficulty sleeping, feeling tense or having an overwhelming sense of dread where all signs mental health support may be needed.

“If you start to notice these symptoms in yourself or someone you care about it can help to offer a calm environment for them to share their feelings and support them with latest advice from authorities, particularly through this acute part of the floods,” Prof Hunt said.

“The majority of people will start to feel better as the situation calms but if these feelings of panic, stress and hyper-vigilance continue once the crisis has passed then that’s a clear sign to seek help.”

Prof. Hunt said mental health teams and professionals in affected towns were likely to be inundated with requests for help and until March 31 people struggling to cope with the fallout of the floods could access Medicare rebates for psychology services via telehealth.

“The existing Medicare Rebate for psychology services through telehealth has a Federal Government funding cut-off of March 31, 2021. We have been calling for an extension to this vital service for several months and the floods ravaging NSW have made this service even more important,” Prof Hunt said.

“Telehealth creates an opportunity for professionals all over the country to support people in flood affected regions through these challenging events. Telehealth also means people who cannot get to their usual mental health professional because of the disaster can access care from their regular provider over the phone. It is vital the Morrison Government responds swiftly to the mental health needs of Australians during this emergency.”

Media inquiries: e: media@acpa.org.au

m: 0421 619 097