

Helping Children Cope With Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

Children may experience disasters and other traumatic events directly, or indirectly through media coverage or by overhearing others talking. Both direct and indirect exposure can cause children to feel confused, frightened or insecure. They look to adults to explain what is happening and for guidance.

These steps will help your children cope after a traumatic event:



REMAIN CALM AND REASSURING

How you react to a traumatic and stressful event affects your children. If they see that you are extremely anxious and worried, they may feel afraid and insecure. Try to stay calm and reduce your own stress and anxiety. This will reassure them and help them feel safe. Ask for help if you need it. *(See the resources listed in this fact sheet.)*



KNOW HOW CHILDREN REACT TO STRESS

Disasters and other traumatic events can affect the way your children feel, think and behave, especially if the event directly involved your own family and community. Children's reactions may vary depending on their age and understanding of what happened.

Reactions Common to Children of All Ages

- Complaining of aches and pains such as headaches, stomach aches and chest pains, without actually being sick
- Anxiety, fear or sadness
- Changes in appetite
- Problems sleeping and/or nightmares
- Sudden behavior changes

Reactions Specific to Pre-school Age Children

- Clinginess
- Aggressive behavior such as hitting, kicking and biting
- Bed-wetting or thumb sucking
- Constipation
- Being afraid of the dark, refusing to sleep alone
- Believing something they did caused the disaster

Reactions Specific to Early School Age Children

- Clinginess, fear of dark
- Avoiding school or having problems with schoolwork
- Conflicts with peers

Reactions Specific to Pre-teens & Teenagers

- Acting out of character: rebellious or aggressive behavior, risk-taking such as drug use
- Withdrawal and loss of interest in usual activities
- Problems at home and school



Tips for Caregivers

Experiencing a disaster or other traumatic event can be stressful for children.

The information in this tip sheet will help you understand how to help children cope with traumatic events.



MAKE TIME FOR YOUR CHILDREN AND ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS

Your children may feel confused and afraid after the event and may have many questions. Don't ignore their worries. Spend extra time with them. Answer their questions, and explain the facts in a way that they can understand. Let them express their feelings, and tell them it is okay to have such feelings.



LIMIT EXPOSURE TO THE NEWS

Too much news about the traumatic event on TV, in the papers or through social media can increase children's worry and confusion. Try to limit the amount of news they watch, and watch the news with them so you can help them understand it.



KEEP FAMILY ROUTINES BUT BE FLEXIBLE

Routines give us a sense of normalcy and control. Try to maintain familiar routines as much as possible, but be flexible so you can adapt to the changed circumstances.

Try to:

- Keep regular activities, such as family meals and bedtime stories
- Ensure that your children eat well, sleep enough and get physical exercise
- Temporarily relax rules and expectations if necessary, including letting your children sleep with the light on if they are scared at night or sleep in your room temporarily if needed



HELP CHILDREN STAY CONNECTED

If your children are at home because of the event, help them keep in touch with other family members and friends. When it is not safe or possible to meet with people face-to-face, phone, e-mail and social networking sites are good ways to communicate.



INVOLVE CHILDREN IN THE COMMUNITY

Involve your children in any rebuilding efforts after the disaster. Give your children tasks they are able to perform. Planning and building a new future together is a good way to enable recovery.



KNOW WHEN AND WHERE TO SEEK HELP

If your children are having difficulty coping, call 1-800-LIFENET, a 24-hour, free and confidential hotline providing mental health information and referrals.

1-800-Lifenet or 1-800-543-3638 (English); 1-877-AYUDESE or 1-877-298-3373 (Spanish); 1-877-990-8585 (Asian); 1-212-982-5284 (TTY).



You are not alone.

Help is available!

1-800-LifeNet

1-800-543-3638

(English)

1-877-Ayudese

1-877-298-3373

(Spanish)

1-877-990-8585

(Chinese)

1-212-982-5284

(TTY)