

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 to disasters and traumatic events can cause children to feel confused, frightened or insecure. Children look to adults to explain what is happening and for guidance on what to do. **These suggestions below will help you help children cope with traumatic events:**



Remain Calm and Reassuring

How you react to a traumatic and stressful event affects your children. If children see that you are anxious and worried, they can feel afraid and insecure. You can help children by remaining calm and finding ways to reduce your own stress and anxiety. This will reassure children and help them feel safe. Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed. For help, you can use or create a network with family and friends or call NYC Well (888-692-9355) for connection to services.



Know How Children React to Stress

Disasters and other traumatic events can affect the way children feel, think and behave, especially if the event directly affects your own family and community. It is important to know that children of any age may react to disasters and traumatic events in a number of ways. In addition, some reactions may vary depending on the child's age and understanding of what happened. The lists below are a guide, but remember that children may react in ways that are similar and different from their peers.

Reactions Common to Children of All Ages

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

Reactions Specific to Children of Preschool Age

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

Reactions Specific to Children of Early School Age

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

Reactions Specific to Preteens and Teenagers

- Acting out of character: rebellious or aggressive behavior, risk-taking such as drug or alcohol 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.

This fact sheet will help you help children cope with traumatic events.



Make Time for Children and Answer Their Questions

Children may feel confused and afraid after a traumatic event, and may have many questions. Notice and acknowledge their worries. Spend extra time with them. Answer their questions and explain the facts in a way they can understand. Let children express whatever they may feel and tell them it is OK to have such feelings. Try to reassure children about what is being done to keep them safe.



Limit Exposure to the News

Too much exposure to news about a disaster or other traumatic events on TV, in newspapers or through social media can also make children worried and confused. Try to limit the amount of news they watch. When they do watch the news, watch along with them so you can explain what is happening.



Keep Family Routines and Be Flexible

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

- Keep basic routines, such as family mealtimes and bedtime stories.
- Keep healthy routines that ensure children eat well, sleep enough and get some physical activity.
- Temporarily relax rules and expectations if necessary, including letting children sleep with the light on if they are scared at night or in another room temporarily if needed.



Stay Connected

If children are at home because of an 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, making phone calls, writing emails and connecting through social media sites are good ways to communicate.



Involve Children

Involve children in any rebuilding efforts after an event. Planning and building a new future together can help to enable recovery. Give children tasks that they can perform, and let them focus on things they can do. Rehearsing family emergency plans can also reduce anxiety about future disasters.



Know When and Where to Seek Help

If children are having difficulty coping, call NYC Well to get connected with services, such as counseling, crisis intervention, peer support and referrals to care. NYC Well is free, confidential and available 24/7 in English, Spanish or Mandarin / Cantonese, with translation available in more than 200 languages. Talk: 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355). Text: WELL to 65173. Chat: nyc.gov/nycwell.



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