



Suggestions, For Helping Children, Teens, and Their Families Cope With Disasters and Traumatic Events

Many disasters and traumatic events strike quickly and without warning. Others may be ongoing over an extended period of time.

When your family directly experiences or is exposed to a disaster or traumatic event, such as a school shooting, hurricane, forest fires, or war, children may become anxious, confused or frightened.

As an adult, you'll need to cope with the event in a way that will help your children handle the situation and reduce their fears. Reactions to disasters and traumatic events may appear immediately after the event or may arise over the weeks following the event. Reactions can vary greatly for each child. Keep in mind that during disasters and traumatic events, children are worried that someone will be hurt or killed, that they may be separated from the family or they may be left alone. After the event they are afraid that something may happen again. Your words and actions can provide reassurance.

Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions:

1. Be honest and give age and developmentally appropriate explanations about the disaster or traumatic event.
 - For young children, in particular, only provide answers to questions they are asking and do not overwhelm them with too much detail. Use language that young children can understand. Do not expose young children to visual images that are terrifying in the newspapers or television.
 - It may be easier for young children to express how they are feeling by asking them to talk about how their stuffed animals or dolls are feeling or thinking.
2. Help children and teens to express how they are feeling about what they have seen or heard. Younger children may want to make a drawing about how they are feeling, while older school-age children and teens can benefit from writing about how they feel. - Ask children and teens, "What is the scariest or worst thing about this event for you?" If your child is unable to express their feelings don't force them to, but let them know you are there to listen when they are ready.
3. Reassure children that they did nothing wrong to cause what happened. Toddlers and preschool children especially feel guilty when something tragic happens.
4. Tell children and teens that what they are feeling (e.g., anger, anxiety, and helplessness) is normal and that others feel the same way. Let your children know about your own feelings as it will allow them to feel OK about their own fears.
5. Alleviate some of their anxiety by reassuring children that we will get through this together and will be stronger as a result of what we have been through. Emphasize that everything is now under control and that adults will be there to help them through this and that they are not alone.
6. Help children and teens to release their tension by encouraging daily physical exercise and activities.
7. Keep as much as possible to regular routines and continue to provide structure to children's schedules.
8. Recognize that a tragic event could elevate psychological or physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, abdominal pain or chest pain) in children and teens that are already depressed or anxious.

- Remember that young children who are depressed typically have different symptoms (e.g., restlessness, excessive motor activity) than older school-age children or teens who are depressed (e.g., sad or withdrawn affect; difficulty sleeping or eating; talking about feeling hopeless).
 - Anger can be a sign of anxiety in children and teens.
 - Children, even teens, who are stressed typically regress (e.g., revert to doing things that they did when they were younger, such as sucking their thumbs, bedwetting, or acting dependent upon their parents). This is a healthy temporary coping strategy. If your child has any ongoing signs or symptoms of depression, persistent anxiety, recurrent pain, persistent behavioral changes, or if they have difficulty maintaining their routine schedules make sure they are seen by a health care or mental health professional.
9. Use this opportunity as a time to work with children on their coping skills.
 10. Hug your child!

Coping after the disaster or traumatic event is important as you continue to try and reduce your child's fear and anxiety. Include your children in recovery activities at your home and in the community. It is important that they feel they are part of the recovery and that they see that life will eventually return to "normal". Include your child in making plans for the future. A disaster or stressful event can be an opportunity to build future coping and life skills as well as bring your family unit closer together. Most children will adapt and grow through an experience with caring support from family and friends.

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