

Helping Youth Cope with Disaster

Tip Sheet

2017



The challenging job of raising children can become harder when a disaster happens. Disasters take different forms—natural (earthquakes, tornados, wildfires), family loss, school shootings, and community violence. These events affect parents and children in different ways. Parents and children can experience stress if they were impacted directly by the disaster, know someone who was affected, or learn about the events from the news.

A family does better after a disaster when parents recognize how the disaster affects them and use healthy ways to cope. When parents take good care of themselves, they are better able to support their children. Parents coping well with stress also show their children good ways to begin to heal. For more information about how adults can cope with stress following a traumatic event, visit:

www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/coping_with_stress_tips.html.

Children's Reactions to Disaster

Children react differently when a disaster occurs. Some may feel sad, confused, or scared. Others may feel numb or even happy to be alive and safe. How young people express their feelings depends a lot on their age and level of development. Some may cling to parents while others may withdraw and misbehave. Children may also have physical reactions, like headaches and stomach problems. They may have changes in their eating and sleeping habits. This distress may appear immediately before or after a disaster. Some children may not show signs of distress until days or weeks after the disaster. Knowing the signs can help parents respond to and support their children.

Common Thoughts and Emotions:

- Shock or surprise
- Confusion or uncertainty
- Fear and worry about the future
- Concern about safety or being alone
- Feeling vulnerable
- Sadness
- Helplessness or hopelessness
- Anger, tension, or irritability
- Guilt or shame
- Numbness
- Happiness or relief
- Loss of interest in activities or things

Common Behavior Changes:

- Crying
- Bursts of anger or short temper
- Restlessness or misbehavior
- No desire for food or loss of appetite
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Nightmares or bad memories
- Reoccurring thoughts of the event
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Clinging to family or avoiding leaving home
- Headaches, back pains, or stomach problems
- Increased heart rate and difficulty breathing

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Helping Children Cope

Feeling better after a disaster will take time. Parents can take steps to help their children feel safer and to support them in coping well with their distress. Healthy activities that can help children and the entire family include:

- **Maintain a normal routine as much as possible.** Stability, consistency, and predictability give children reassurance and can reduce their distress. Children should be encouraged to wake up, go to sleep, and eat meals at their usual times. Normal school routines and after-school activities should be maintained.
- **Keep home a safe place.** Disasters can make children feel like the world has been turned upside down and no place is safe. Regardless of age, home often helps youth feel secure. By minimizing conflict and planning family activities at home, like nightly dinners and movie nights, a child's home can provide critical comfort and space to cope.
- **Talk and listen.** Children often benefit from talking about the disaster and how they are feeling and coping. At a level that children can understand, questions should be answered openly and honestly and misunderstandings corrected. Parents may need to start these conversations, which helps children know they are cared about and it is okay to talk about their feelings. Parents simply listening can provide relief.
- **Encourage expression of feelings.** Having different and changing feelings about a disaster is normal. Expressing these feelings can help. Young children may express how they feel through art or play while older youth may express themselves through talking or writing. Parents can be models of healthy expression.
- **Reassure.** Disasters can challenge children's sense of physical and emotional security. They fear that they will be separated from family, the event will happen again, or they will be harmed. Children can be comforted by hugs and being told they are loved and safe. Being picked up on-time and knowing their parents' whereabouts can increase a sense of security. Knowing how the family, school, and community are keeping them safe can also help.
- **Take information breaks.** Children seeing pictures and listening to stories about the disaster from television, the Internet, and adult conversations can increase or bring back their distress. Limiting youth's exposure to the news and not letting the event dominate family conversations for long periods of time can help children begin to move past the event.
- **Connect with others.** Spending time with friends, volunteering in the community, and participating in recreational activities can be healthy ways for children to heal. Parents can set aside time for these activities and also connect with their children's teachers and friends' parents to support each other and identify ways to help all affected children cope.

Get More Help When Needed

Sometimes parents feel too overwhelmed by a disaster to help their children cope well. Even when parents take steps to help their children cope, these actions may not be enough. Children sometimes need additional care and support to feel better. This help may come from a licensed mental health professional, doctor, or community or faith-based organization. Children may need more help when they:

- Have symptoms of distress, like severe sadness, that lasts for more than two weeks
- Are not able to go to school or resume normal activities because of their distress
- Engage in risky behavior, like alcohol or drug use
- Have thoughts about suicide

Where to Get Immediate Help

Disaster Distress Helpline

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>
Call or text 1-800-985-5990.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
1-800-273-8255

Child-Help USA

<https://www.childhelp.org/>
1-800-422-4453

Where to Learn More

CDC Division of Violence Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/publichealthissue/copingwith-stresstips.html>

SAMHSA Disaster Distress

www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/