

# HELPING CHILDREN COPE AFTER A DISASTER

## A Children's Mental Health Tip Sheet for Parents, Guardians and Caregivers

Parents, guardians, and caregivers can be an important part of coping for children who have witnessed or survived a disaster or traumatic event. They can provide the normalcy of a routine in a safe, caring, and supportive environment where children can express their thoughts and feelings.

It is important to be informed and ready to help if signs and reactions to stress are occurring in children. Whether a child personally experiences, witnesses on television or hears reports and discussions about a disaster, children of all ages are affected by disasters or traumatic events.

Children respond to disasters or traumatic events in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; while others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, and then begin to show behaviors associated with stress or depression. It is important to remember that these children are not being bad, but are in fact afraid and trying to deal with their very real feelings.

### **Preschool Age (1-5 years old)**

Very young children, ages one to five years old, find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. They have not yet developed their own coping skills and therefore depend on parents, family members, educators and other caregivers to help them deal with difficult times.

Very young children may also regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. For example, preschoolers may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or educator or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are also common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, aggressive or

withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the event or may speak of it repeatedly.

### **Early Childhood/Grade School Age (5-11 years old)**

Young children, ages five to eleven years old, may have some of the same reactions as preschoolers. They too may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete for attention, fear going to school, make poor grades, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to "more childish" behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

### **Adolescents/Middle School Age (12-14 years old)**

While children twelve to fourteen years old share some of the same reactions as young children, they are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, school work, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention by becoming disruptive or by displaying other attention seeking behaviors, they may also withdraw, resist authority or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or substance use. Young people of this age are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be accepted and thought of as "normal" by their friends. They are also less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.

### **Later Adolescents/Older Teens (14+ years old)**

In addition to the reactions that children twelve to fourteen years old could have, children in later adolescence may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also try to downplay their worries or deny the extent of their

emotional reactions to the traumatic event. And, like children at other ages, when adolescents and older teens are frightened, they too may express their fear through acting out or regressing to younger behavior. Teens tend to talk when they feel comfortable doing so. Be prepared to set aside time to listen.

### **HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE**

Let your child know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens. Reassurance is important to helping children of all ages through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Older children may also want to discuss the emotional, physical, and financial impact of the event. Answer questions about the event honestly and age appropriately, letting them know that in some cases you do not have the answer to their question.

#### **Other Tips:**

- Encourage your child to express their emotions through talking, writing, drawing or painting if they are unable to talk about their feelings.
- Find a way for your child to help people who were affected by the disaster.
- Provide careful supervision and additional support for children, especially those with emotional problems such as depression.
- Limit activities that may cause anxiety such as television news, scary movies or stories.
- Let your child know that they are safe and that you love them.
- Make sure they get adequate rest and exercise and eat healthy foods and snacks.

### **TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF**

As a parent, guardian or caregiver of a child troubled by a disaster or traumatic event, it is important that you take care of yourself—especially if you too have gone through the trauma. This is particularly important, as it will help you to better listen to your child and give them the understanding and support that they need to cope and heal.

#### **Other Tips:**

- Return to day-to-day structure as soon as possible
- Spend time with others
- Use your personal support systems, family and friends when you are ready to talk or if you need help caring for your child
- Keep a journal of how you feel
- Plan healthy activities to help you feel good
- Try to be patient with others who are also under stress
- Give yourself permission to feel moody, nervous or blue
- Make as many daily decisions as possible to have a feeling of control over your life
- Try to rest and eat healthy, regular meals
- Get help if your feelings are keeping you from helping your child or interfering with your daily life

### **WHO CAN HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILD FEEL BETTER?**

Working through feelings after a disaster is a normal part of coping. You and your child do not have to deal with everything alone. There are people who can and want to help you and your child get through this challenging time. A teacher, counselor, religious leader, social worker, doctor, or mental health professional may give you or your child the support you need to get better, and get your life on track.



#### **For Help Contact:**

**Mental Health America of Greater Houston  
Information & Referral**

713-522-5161

8:30 am-5:00 pm, Monday-Friday

#### **Crisis Hotline**

713-HOTLINE (468-5463) 24 hours

#### **Spanish Crisis Hotline**

713-47-AYUDA (29832) 24 hours

#### **Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

1-800-273-TALK (8255) 24 hours