

Recovering from a Disaster: Emotional Care for Children and Youth

Disasters often strike with little or no warning. In an instant your home and community can be damaged or destroyed and forever changed. Even if your home or business does not suffer directly, no one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it.

For many, a disaster continues as a very real presence even long after it has passed. Feelings of sadness, depression, frustration, anger and anxiety are common. It is not unusual for these feelings to last for many months. Learning to recognize the normal reactions and emotions that occur can help you better understand these feelings and become more comfortable and effective in coping with them.

The following information explains the range of feelings and behaviors you can expect from your children and youth and how you can best help them during this time of recovery. Suggestions for coping with the aftermath are offered throughout this handout.

Children and youth react differently to trauma and stressful events than adults do.

Their responses may be delayed or difficult to detect, especially children who have a history of acting out or who may be suffering with depression, which tends to produce symptoms of withdrawal and silent suffering. Of importance to note is that younger children respond in a manner that is reflective of the adults and other caretakers in their lives, picking up on the fears and concerns of the adults.

Some children will have changes in behavior.

You can help children and youth cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life can again have a sense of being normal.

Things to look for

In children ages 5 and younger you may notice the following:

- More clingy behavior
- Fear of separation from parents or caregivers
- Agitation, acting out, or bouts of crying
- Behavioral regression such as bedwetting or baby talk
- Difficulty with sleeping or nightmares
- Appetite changes
- Avoidance of any reminders of the trauma

In children ages 6–11 you may notice these feelings, behaviors, and experiences:

- Repetitious play in which the child re-enacts traumatic events
- Difficulty with sleeping or nightmares

- Unusual outbursts of anger
- Fighting or avoidance of going to school
- Isolation from friends and family
- Fear and preoccupation with issues of safety and danger as shown by behaviors such as locking doors
- Regression to behaviors of previous developmental stages
- Expressions of guilt and magical thinking that the trauma was his or her fault
- Stomachaches, headaches, or other physical problems
- Difficulty with focusing at school, doing homework, or reading
- Persistent feelings of distress when thinking about or reminded of the traumatic event

In youth and adolescents, 11-19 years old you may notice these feelings, behaviors, and experiences:

- Feeling worried and nervous most of the time
- Having difficulty concentrating, sleeping and eating
- Having headaches, stomachaches, muscle pains, feeling tired most of the time
- “shutting down” and withdrawing from people or activities
- Fighting with others
- Engaging in risky behavior
- Crying and feelings of hopelessness

How to cope and what works

There are no simple exercises to easily address all behaviors. There are some things you can do, though, that may help.

Understand—Be Compassionate.

Throughout all of this, it's important to remember that your child is reacting to the loss of something familiar, whether it is a home, a family member, or even just his or her routine. In many cases, he or she may be responding to the loss of a sense of safety and security.

Your child is, in a sense, mourning a former way of life and his or her behavior is reflective of the mourning process. In fact, it can take a long time for a child to recover from losses or changes that affect his or her sense of security.

Stop and Focus All of Your Attention on your Child and Teenager for a Little While

Perhaps taking a few additional moments to connect with the child will be all he or she requires to feel more secure.

- Hug and touch your child when appropriate, or just be present with them.
- Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together.
- Talk with your child about his or her feelings about the disaster but be careful not to pressure them to talk.
- Share *your* feelings. Address your own trauma in a healthy way. Avoid hitting, isolating, abandoning, or making fun of children.

- Give information the child can understand.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Ask your teen and youth what are they hearing in school or seeing on TV or the internet. Try to watch news coverage on TV and the internet with them.

Ease your child back into a regular routine, and help to minimize his or her anxiety

- Stick to a predictable schedule and routine as much as possible. Change is disruptive and may create anxiety in children. Parents can assist kids' general adaptation by minimizing irregularities, especially surrounding separation.
- Make sure they have age-appropriate tasks and can participate in doing chores in a way that makes them feel useful
- Support children and youth spending time with friends or having quiet time to write or create art
- When leaving the child, tell him or her where you are going and what you will be doing. Tell the child what he or she will be doing while you are gone. For example: "Mrs. Franklin will play blocks with you and make your lunch. I'll be home after lunch."
- Be patient and make separation as safe and pleasant as possible. This may require taking extra time in the morning so clinging behavior does not delay and stress mom or dad.
- Reassure the child by explaining that you are leaving because you must and not because you do not love him or her or dislike being with him or her; separate leaving from loving.
- Reassure your child by saying that you will see him or her later. Separation fears may exist in part because the child is uncertain of a reunion.
- Explain that missing mom or dad is normal and hard but does not mean the child cannot have friends or fun.
- Encourage childhood play and praise the child for being big enough to play without you.
- Do not linger as this may reinforce the separation displays. After all, from the child's perspective, clinging pays off because mom and dad stay longer. So, leave your child when you must and do it swiftly but lovingly.

To help your child deal with the loss of security and feel more secure, there are some things you can do:

- Acknowledge and respect your child's fear and losses. Allow your child to grieve about their lost treasures: a toy, a blanket, their home.
- Encourage your child to talk about how he or she feels—what he or she is afraid of.
- Make time for extra hugs and touch in general.
- Talk with your child about what you will do if another disaster strikes. Let your child help in preparing and planning for future disasters.
- Try to spend extra time together in family activities to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.
- Eliminate stressors whenever possible. This is easy to say and much harder to do. However, teachers, caregivers and parents can work together to reduce stress by doing such things as making sure children eat right, get plenty of rest, slow down, have time to talk about issues and concerns and avoid inappropriate television programming.
- Model self-care, set routines, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep, exercise and take deep breaths to handle stress.



When children and youth need more help, consider talking to a mental health professional to help identify the areas of difficulty.

Disaster Distress Helpline: 800-985-5990

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

More questions? Contact Nikoleta at: Nikoleta.Boukydis@cityofchicago.org