

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE TRAUMA OF DISASTERS

Children 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 off of the adults/caretakers in their lives, picking up on the fears/concerns of the adults.

Communication is key. Allow children to tell their story and talk about their experiences. Listen closely and attentively to what they say. Validate their feelings.

Be reassuring. Let children know that their feelings, nightmares, fears, concerns, guilt, shame, sadness and anger are normal responses to a traumatic event.

Let children try new activities that help them to relax. Encourage children to participate in games, sports, or other activities that they may be good at or that make them feel capable, competent and in control.

Remind children about other difficult situations that they handled well. Talk about another time when they struggled with a problem and coped with it-the death of a family member, a car accident or other incident. Empower them to utilize and increase their own coping skills or even to develop new ones.

Get together with friends and family. Encourage children to talk with friends and relatives. They may learn from those who have coped with losses or disasters in the past.

If you are seriously concerned about a child's reactions, act quickly. Seek professional help as soon as possible when a child's reactions appear to be beyond the normal reactions to stress and trauma.

Initiate contact with children. Don't wait for children to come to you. Ask them specific questions about:

- how they are sleeping-if they are having nightmares
- how they are getting along with others-are they fighting with friends or others
- how they are doing with their school work-is homework harder-have their grades slipped
- what has changed for them-are they more afraid-what is bothering them most

Giving children an opportunity to talk about these things helps them feel supported and understood.

REACTIONS

Children 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 very young children respond in a manner that is reflective of the adults/caretakers in their lives, picking up on the fears/concerns of the adults.

Some children will have changes in behavior.

Very young children ages 2-5 may:

- be more clingy.
- be fearful of being separated from parents or caregivers.
- may be agitated, act out or have crying bouts.
- regress behaviorally such as bedwetting or baby talk.
- have trouble sleeping or nightmares.
- experience appetite changes.
- avoid any reminders of the trauma.

Children ages 6-11 may:

- engage in repetitious play going over and over the traumatic event.
- have trouble sleeping, nightmares.
- have unusual outbursts of anger.
- fight or avoid going to school.
- self isolate from friends and family.
- be fearful and preoccupied with issues of safety and danger such as locking doors.
- regress to behaviors of previous developmental state.
- express guilt and magical thinking that the trauma was their fault.
- have stomachaches, headaches or other physical problems.
- have trouble focusing at school, doing homework or reading.
- experience persistent feelings of distress when thinking about or reminded of the traumatic event.

Youth and Adolescents ages 11-19 may:

- have some of the same reactions to trauma as younger children.
- often they want much more attention from parents or caregivers.
- may stop doing their school work or chores at home.
- feel helpless and guilty because they cannot take on adult roles as their family or the community responds to a trauma or disaster.
- go through a lot of physical and emotional changes because of their developmental stage, so, it may be even harder for them to cope with trauma.
- older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine "I'm ok" or even silence when they are upset.
- complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally.
- start arguments at home and/or at school, resisting any structure or authority
- engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs.

HOW TO HELP-WHAT TO DO**AGE SPECIFIC COPING****For ages 5 and under:**

- Keep normal routines and favorite ritualistic activities as much as possible.
- Limit their exposure to discussions about the event, television and radio pictures/ads.
- Allow them to tell you their story and listen attentively.
- Reassure them that adults are in charge and will take care of them.
- Ask them what will make them feel better.
- Give them appropriate affection such as hugs and hand holding or shoulder patting reassuring them they are cared for and will be ok.
- Provide opportunities for them to be creatively expressive-with crayons, paints, paper, etc.

For school aged children-all of the above applies plus:

- Encourage them to come to you with questions and answer their questions honestly without giving them gory details or overexposing them.
- Talk to them about what they are hearing on the news and in adult conversations encouraging them to come to you for information and to ask questions.
- Make sure they have opportunities to talk and play with their friends giving them permission to enjoy life, feel joy and celebrate every day.
- Let them know their job is to focus on school and that adults will take care of the adult problems and concerns.
- Encourage them to participate in community activities such as cleaning up the neighborhood or helping the elderly shut in.
- Ask them what makes them feel better and safe.

For Teens-all of the above applies plus:

- Allow teens to feel control over themselves and their activities as much as is appropriate and safe.
- Encourage teens to talk with their friends and trusted adults like family members and teachers.
- Encourage teens to let you know if they are worried about someone else like a friend or school mate.
- Allow teens to take on a limited amount of more adult-like responsibility in the family activities that may help them feel they are contributing more to the family if they ask to do so.
- Give teens opportunities to express themselves creatively as will art, drama, music and dance-assist in planning opportunities for such activities on group levels.

EXAMPLE: CLINGING BEHAVIOR OR SEPARATION PROBLEMS

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 their routine. In many cases, they may be responding to the loss of a sense of safety in security.

Your child is, in a sense, mourning a former way of life and his behavior is reflective of his mourning process. In fact, it can take a long time to recover from losses or changes that affect a child's sense of security. You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life can have a sense of being normal.

1. Stop and Focus All of Your Attention on Your Child for a Little While

- a. Perhaps taking a few additional moments to connect with the child will be all they require to feel more secure.
- b. Hug and touch your child as appropriate (e.g. put a hand on their shoulder or hold their hand).
- c. Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together.
- d. Talk with your child about his or her feelings about the disaster.
- e. Share *your* feelings.
- f. Give information the child can understand.
- g. Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.

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

- a. 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.
- b. Acknowledge and respect their fear and losses. Allow children to grieve about their lost treasures; a toy, a blanket, their home.
- c. Encourage your child to talk about how they feel-what they are afraid of.
- d. 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.
- e. Make time for extra hugs and touch in general.
- f. When leaving the child, tell them 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."

- g. Re-assure the child you are leaving because you must and not because you do not love them or dislike being with them; separate leaving from loving.
- h. Re-assure your child that you will see them later. Separation fears may exist in part because the child is uncertain of a reunion.
- i. Explain that missing mom or dad is normal and hard but does not mean they cannot have friends or fun.
- j. Encourage childhood play and praise the child for being big enough to play without you.
- k. Do not linger as this may reinforce the separation displays. After all from the them when you must and do it swiftly but lovingly.
- l. Talk with your child about what you will do if another disaster strikes. Let your child help in preparing and planning for future disasters.
- m. Try to spend extra time together in family activities to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.
- n. 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.

In summary, to help a child deal with life transitions, it is important to talk with them, define new expectations or routines, and verbalize kids' feelings that are normal under the circumstances. Voicing and validating a child's sadness or fears helps them feel understood, normal, and accepted. That alone alleviates pressure and re-connects parent and child.

Making the child feel loved, safe, and worthy can help them grow naturally out of their fears of separation.

Color Breathing- A Relaxation Exercise for Children

A Relaxation Exercise for Children

Children should be guided through this exercise by a parent, caregiver, teacher or other responsible adult with the consent of the legal guardian.

1. **Introduce the relaxation exercise** explaining that this will help the child from feeling very strong reactions and to help their body to calm down. Stress that it takes practice.
2. **Help children with imagery.** Instruct them as follows:
Think of your favorite color, one that makes you feel nice-blue like the sky or yellow like the sun, or another one that you like. You choose.
Then pick a color that you use to hold your feelings when tense or afraid, like grey. Close your eyes, then take a slow deep breath in through your nose. As the air comes in imagine it is your favorite color. Say to yourself, “in with the good, relaxing pink air.” Hold it for a few seconds and then breathe slowly out of your mouth. Say to yourself, “in with the good, relaxing pink air and out with the grey air.” Repeat this three times.
3. **Introduce the idea of muscle relaxation** by saying, “Begin to feel your arms and legs start to get loose as the beautiful pink air fills your body. In with the pink, relaxing air, out with the grey. In with the pink and out with the grey.”

Now your stomach and shoulders are starting to feel loose and relaxed. Slowly and deeply breathe in the pink air and breathe out the grey air. Breathe in the pink air and breathe out the grey air.

Now your head and face and neck feel relaxed and filled with good air. Breathe in the pink air and breathe out the grey air. Relax.
4. **Reinforce the imagery by saying,** “Think of yourself with good, relaxed pink air in your body. In with the pink air, and out with the grey. In with the pink air and out with the grey. Relax. Think of yourself with good, relaxed pink air and good feelings. Practice breathing again and then slowly open your eyes and keep the good, relaxed feelings.
5. **Check in.** Ask the child how they are doing and tell them they did a good job with the relaxation breathing exercise. Tell them that this is a way to help themselves when they want to calm down after something happens or when they are reminded of something scary. Tell them that this can even help them when they think they *might* have scary feelings and that they can do this ahead of time to help calm themselves.
6. **Practice.** If you are a teacher or therapist, suggest that the child share the exercise with their parent or primary caregiver so that all adults can help remind the child to practice this exercise as they may need.

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