

Tips for Helping Children Cope

Trauma can change the way children view their world. Children, like many people, may be confused or frightened by the news and will look to adults for information and guidance. One of the difficulties experienced by parents is they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact on their child. Children's reactions will depend upon the severity of the trauma, their personality, the way they cope with stress, previous experiences and the availability of support. It is common for children to regress both behaviorally and academically following a trauma. A good way to view the situation is that they are normal children in an abnormal circumstance.

Parents and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security, and continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

It is natural for children to first experience some sort of denial that the situation really happened. Fears, worries or nightmares are common following a trauma. Sleep disturbances or eating difficulties may happen. Also children may begin to regress emotionally or act younger than their chronological age. They also may become more clinging, unhappy and needy of parental attention and comfort. Feelings of irritability, anger, sadness or guilt may often emerge. Somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches or sweating are not unusual. Children and adolescents may repeatedly relive the trauma by acting it out in play or dreams. Other students may seek to avoid all reminders of the trauma by withdrawing from others, refusing to discuss their feelings, or avoiding activities that remind them of the people or places associated with the trauma. Some loss of interest in school, misbehavior, and poor concentration are other common reactions.

Reactions to Disaster

Loss of Control: By their very nature, disasters are something over which we have no control-if we did, we would stop them from happening. The feeling of loss of control can be overwhelming.

Loss of Stability: Disasters also interrupt the natural order of things. Stability is gone and this is very threatening: it can destroy trust and upset equilibrium for extended periods. After all, if this disaster could happen, then most anything else can happen too.

Self-centered Reactions: Children's immediate reaction to disaster often indicates a fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them, to an extent that you think this is unreasonable. However, young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children may need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety, family member's safety and of the outcome of the disaster as it relates to them.

Stages of reactions to loss. Some reactions to disasters are similar to the reaction to other losses or grief. These include denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Not every person experiences all of these feelings, and they do not always occur in just this order. How feelings are expressed will vary with the age of the child. A very young child may express denial by refusing to talk about the situation or clowning when others are talking about the disaster. Older children may go to their rooms or insist on going to the mall. Anger in a young child may involve a tantrum and in older child may be manifested by yelling at a parent.

Common stress symptoms: Following a disaster or traumatic crisis event, children -like adults- will likely exhibit at least several typical symptoms of stress, reflecting their emotional reactions and sense of loss. Symptoms tend to vary with age and developmental maturity of the child. If symptoms persist for a long time or seem extreme, parents should seek professional help through the school, healthcare provider, or contact E&FCS.

All Adults Should:

1. **Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
2. **Reassure children that they are safe** and so are the other important adults in their lives. Explain that these buildings were targeted for their symbolism.
3. **Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.** Explain that the government emergency workers, police, fireman, doctors, and even the military are helping people who are hurt and are working to ensure that no further tragedies occur.
4. **Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
5. **Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.
6. **Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
7. **Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.
8. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** **Early elementary school** children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community. **For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!**

What Parents Can Do

1. **Focus on your children over the next day or so.** Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.
2. **Make time to talk with your children.** Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.
3. **Stay close to your children.** Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.
4. **Limit the amount of your child's television viewing of these events.** If they must watch, watch with them for a brief time; then turn the set off. Don't sit mesmerized re-watching the same events over and over again.
5. **Maintain a "normal" routine.** To the extent possible stick to your family's normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., **but don't be inflexible.** Children may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night.
6. **Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed.** These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.
7. **Safeguard your children's physical health.** Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise and nutrition.
8. **Consider praying or thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims and their families.** It may be a good time to take your children to church or the synagogue, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims and their families.
9. **Find out what resources your school has in place to help children cope.** Most schools are likely to be open and often are a good place for children to regain a sense of normalcy. Being with their friends and teachers can help. Schools should also have a plan for making counseling available to children and adults who need it.

Adapted from: Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts from you School Psychologist;
Children's Reaction to Trauma; Trauma and Children; Helping Children Cope with Tuesday's Act of Terrorism, National Association of School Psychologist