



# Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event:

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND TEACHERS

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*Adult support and reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time.*

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Children and youth can face emotional strains after a traumatic event such as a car crash or violence.<sup>1</sup> Disasters also may leave them with long-lasting harmful effects.<sup>2</sup> When children experience a trauma, watch it on TV, or overhear others discussing it, they can feel scared, confused, or anxious. Young people react to trauma differently than adults. Some may react right away; others may show signs that they are having a difficult time much later. As such, adults do not always know when a child needs help coping. This tip sheet will help parents, caregivers, and teachers learn some common reactions, respond in a helpful way, and know when to seek support.

### Possible Reactions to a Disaster or Traumatic Event

Many of the reactions noted below are normal when children and youth are handling the stress right after an event. If any of these behaviors lasts for more than 2 to 4 weeks, or if they suddenly appear later on, these children may need more help coping. Information about where to find help is in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

### PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

Very young children may go back to thumb sucking or wetting the bed at night after a trauma. They may fear strangers, darkness, or monsters. It is fairly common for preschool children to become clingy with a parent, caregiver, or teacher or to want to stay in a place where they feel safe. They may express the trauma repeatedly in their play or tell exaggerated stories about what happened. Some children's eating and sleeping habits may change. They also may have aches and pains that cannot be explained. Other symptoms to watch for are aggressive or withdrawn behavior, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and disobedience.

- **Infants and Toddlers, 0–2 years old,** cannot understand that a trauma is happening, but they know when their caregiver is upset. They may start to show the same emotions as their caregivers, or they may act differently, like crying for no reason, withdrawing from people, and not playing with their toys.
- **Children, 3–5 years old,** can understand the effects of trauma. They may have trouble adjusting to change and loss. They may depend on the adults around them to help them feel better.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Children and youth in these age ranges may have some of the same reactions to trauma as younger children. Often, younger children want much more attention from parents or caregivers. They may stop doing their school work or chores at home. Some youth may feel helpless and guilty because they cannot take on adult roles as their family or the community responds to a trauma or disaster.

- **Children, 6–10 years old**, may fear going to school and stop spending time with friends. They may have trouble paying attention and do poorly in school overall. Some may become aggressive for no clear reason. Or they may act younger than their age by asking to be fed or dressed by their parent or caregiver.
- **Youth and Adolescents, 11–19 years old**, 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 okay” or even silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Some may start arguments at home and/or at school, resisting any structure or authority. They also may engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol or drugs.

## How Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers Can Support Children’s Recovery

The good news is that children and youth are usually quite resilient. Most of the time they get back to feeling okay soon after a trauma. With the right support from the adults around them, they can thrive and recover. The most important ways to help are to make sure children feel connected, cared about, and loved.

- Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children express their emotions through conversation, writing, drawing, and singing. Most children want to talk about a trauma, so let them. Accept their feelings and tell them it is okay to feel sad, upset, or stressed. Crying is often a way to relieve stress and grief. **Pay attention and be a good listener.**
- Adults can ask the teens and youth they are caring for what they know about the event. What are they hearing in school or seeing on TV? Try to watch news coverage on TV or the Internet with them. And, limit access so they have time away from reminders about the trauma. Don’t let talking about the trauma take over the family or classroom discussion for long periods of time. **Allow them to ask questions.**
- Adults can help children and youth see the good that can come out of a trauma. Heroic actions, families and friends who help, and support from people in the community are examples. Children may better cope with a trauma or disaster by helping others. They can write caring letters to those who have been hurt or have lost their homes; they can send thank you notes to people who helped. **Encourage these kinds of activities.**
- If human violence or error caused an event, be careful not to blame a cultural, racial, or ethnic group, or persons with psychiatric disabilities. This may be a good opportunity to talk with children about discrimination and diversity. **Let children know that they are not to blame when bad things happen.**
- It’s okay for children and youth to see adults sad or crying, but try not to show intense emotions. Screaming and hitting or kicking furniture or walls can be scary for children. **Violence can further frighten children or lead to more trauma.<sup>3</sup>**
- Adults can show children and youth how to take care of themselves. If you are in good physical and emotional health, you are more likely to be readily available to support the children you care about. **Model self-care, set routines, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep, exercise, and take deep breaths to handle stress.**

## Tips for Talking With Children and Youth of Different Age Groups After a Disaster or Traumatic Event

### PRESCHOOL CHILDREN, 0–5 YEARS OLD

Give these very young children a lot of cuddling and verbal support:

- Take a deep breath before holding or picking them up, and focus on them, not the trauma.
- Get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using words they can understand.
- Tell them that you still care for them and will continue to take care of them so they feel safe.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE, 6–19 YEARS OLD

Nurture children and youth in this age group:

- Ask your child or the children in your care what worries them and what might help them cope.
- Offer comfort with gentle words, a hug when appropriate, or just your presence.
- Spend more time with the children than usual, even for a short while. Returning to school activities and getting back to routines at home is important too.
- Excuse traumatized children from chores for a day or two. After that, make sure they have age-appropriate tasks and can participate in a way that makes them feel useful.
- Support children spending time with friends or having quiet time to write or create art.
- Encourage children to participate in recreational activities so they can move around and play with others.



- Address your own trauma in a healthy way. Avoid hitting, isolating, abandoning, or making fun of children.
- Let children know that you care about them—spend time doing something special with them, and make sure to check on them in a nonintrusive way.

**A NOTE OF CAUTION:** *Be careful not to pressure children to talk about a trauma or join in expressive activities. While most children will easily talk about what happened, some may become frightened. Some may even get traumatized again by talking about it, listening to others talk about it, or looking at drawings of the event. Allow children to remove themselves from these activities, and monitor them for signs of distress.*

## Helpful Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

### Treatment Locators

Mental Health Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-789-2647 (English and español)

TDD: 1-866-889-2647

Website: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/MHTreatmentLocator>

MentalHealth.gov

Website: <http://www.mentalhealth.gov>

*MentalHealth.gov provides U.S. government information and resources on mental health.*

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357)

(24/7 English and español); TDD: 1-800-487-4889

Website: <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

### Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>

*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

Disaster Distress Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746

Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

Child Welfare Information Gateway

Toll-Free: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

Website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/how.cfm>

### Additional Behavioral Health Resources

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/traumaJustice>

*This behavioral health resource can be accessed by visiting the SAMHSA website and then selecting the related link.*

Administration for Children and Families

Website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/>

## When Children, Youth, Parents, Caregivers, or Teachers Need More Help

In some instances, a child and his or her family may have trouble getting past a trauma. Parents or caregivers may be afraid to leave a child alone. Teachers may see that a student is upset or seems different. It may be helpful for everyone to work together. Consider talking with a mental health professional to help identify the areas of difficulty. Together, everyone can decide how to help and learn from each other. If a child has lost a loved one, consider working with someone who knows how to support children who are grieving.<sup>4</sup> Find a caring professional in the **Helpful Resources** section of this tip sheet.

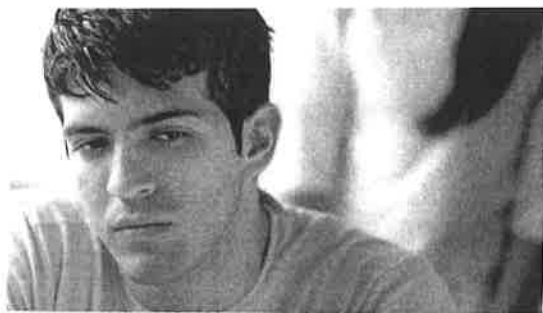
<sup>1</sup> National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (n.d.). Traffic safety facts, 2003 data: Children. (DOT HS 809 762). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved from <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/809762.pdf>.

<sup>2,4</sup> National Commission on Children and Disasters. (2010). National Commission on Children and Disasters: 2010 report to the President and Congress. (AHRQ Publication No. 10-MO37). Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Retrieved from <http://archive.ahrq.gov/prep/nccdreport/nccdreport.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Children's Bureau. (2010). Child maltreatment 2009. Washington, DC: Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/child-maltreatment-2009>.



HHS Publication No. SMA-12-4732  
(Revised 2013)



## Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: MANAGING STRESS

### Important Things To Know About Disasters and Other Traumatic Events

If you were involved in a disaster such as a hurricane, flood, or even terrorism, or another traumatic event like a car crash, you may be affected personally regardless of whether you were hurt or lost a loved one. You can be affected just by witnessing a disaster or other traumatic event. It is common to show signs of stress after exposure to a disaster or other traumatic event, and it is important to monitor your physical and emotional health.

### Possible Reactions to a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event

Try to identify your early warning signs of stress. Stress usually shows up in the four areas shown below, but everyone should check for ANY unusual stress responses after a disaster or other traumatic event. Below are some of the most common reactions.

#### YOU MAY FEEL EMOTIONALLY:

- Anxious or fearful
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Angry, especially if the event involved violence
- Guilty, even when you had no control over the traumatic event
- Heroic, like you can do anything
- Like you have too much energy or no energy at all
- Disconnected, not caring about anything or anyone
- Numb, unable to feel either joy or sadness

#### YOU MAY HAVE PHYSICAL REACTIONS, SUCH AS:

- Having stomachaches or diarrhea
- Having headaches or other physical pains for no clear reason
- Eating too much or too little
- Sweating or having chills
- Getting tremors (shaking) or muscle twitches
- Being jumpy or easily startled



## After the Event

### Managing Your Tasks

If you've been involved in a disaster or other traumatic event, a number of tasks likely require your attention fairly urgently. First, make sure you are not injured, as sometimes survivors don't realize they've been physically hurt until many hours later. If you realize you've been injured, seek medical treatment before you do anything else. If you need to find a safe place to stay, work on that task next. Make sure to let a family member or friend know where you are and how to reach you. Secure your identification and any other papers you may need, such as insurance, bank, property, and medical records. Completing one task at a time may help you feel like you are gaining back some control, so make a list of the most important things you need to do. Remember to be patient with yourself. Take deep breaths or gently stretch to calm yourself before you tackle each task. Plan to do something relaxing after working for a while.

### YOU MAY HAVE BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS, SUCH AS:

- Having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, or trouble relaxing
- Noticing an increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- Feeling sad or crying frequently
- Using alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs or even prescription medication in an attempt to reduce distressing feelings or to forget
- Having outbursts of anger, feeling really irritated and blaming other people for everything
- Having difficulty accepting help or helping others
- Wanting to be alone most of the time and isolating yourself

### YOU MAY EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS IN YOUR THINKING, SUCH AS:

- Having trouble remembering things
- Having trouble thinking clearly and concentrating
- Feeling confused
- Worrying a lot
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Having difficulty talking about what happened or listening to others



## Practical Tips for Relieving Stress

These stress management activities seem to work well for most people. Use the ones that work for you.

**Talk with others** who understand and accept how you feel. Reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or faith-based leader to explore what meaning the event may have for you. Connect with other survivors of the disaster or other traumatic events and share your experience.

**Body movement** helps to get rid of the buildup of extra stress hormones. Exercise once daily or in smaller amounts throughout the day. Be careful not to lift heavy weights. You can damage your muscles if you have too much adrenaline in your system. If you don't like exercise, do something simple, like taking a walk, gently stretching, or meditating.

**Take deep breaths.** Most people can benefit from taking several deep breaths often throughout the day. Deep breathing can move stress out of your body and help you to calm yourself. It can even help stop a panic attack.

**Listen to music.** Music is a way to help your body relax naturally. Play music timed to the breath or to your heartbeat. Create a relaxing playlist for yourself and listen to it often.

**Pay attention to your physical self.** Make sure to get enough sleep and rest each day. Don't leave resting for the weekend. Eat healthy meals and snacks and make sure to drink plenty of water. Avoid caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol, especially in large amounts. Their effects are multiplied under stress and can be harmful, just making things worse.



**Use known coping skills.** How did you handle past traumatic events like a car crash or the death of a loved one? What helped then (e.g., spent time with family, went to a support group meeting)? Try using those coping skills now.

## When Your Stress Is Getting the Best of You

Know that distressing feelings about a disaster or traumatic event usually fade over time (2–4 weeks after the event) as you get back to routines—and especially if you have engaged in some ways to help yourself. Try to use some of these tips several times a week.

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If you or someone you care about continues to show signs of stress and you are becoming concerned about him or her, you may want to reach out for some extra help. Contact one of the **Helpful Resources** listed on the next page.

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*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

**Workplace Helpline**  
Toll-Free: 1-800-WORKPLACE (1-800-967-5752)  
Website: <http://workplace.samhsa.gov>

**Office for Victims of Crime\***  
Toll-Free: 1-800-851-3420, or 301-519-5500  
TTY: 301-947-8374  
Website: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/ovcres/welcome.html>

*\*Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

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WEB: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>



HHS Publication No. SMA-13-4776  
(Revised 2013)