

Helping children and adolescents following a tragedy

By creating a supportive environment where children feel safe in asking questions and believe their concerns are being heard, we can help them cope with stressful events and experiences and reduce the risk of lasting emotional difficulties. Although these may be difficult conversations, they are important. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to talk with children about these events.

Common reactions in children and teens after a disaster or tragedy

- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Sadness, depression, hyperactivity
- Irritability or anger
- Having no feelings at all or feeling numb
- A lack of energy or feeling exhausted all the time
- Lack of appetite or, the opposite, eating all the time
- Trouble concentrating or feeling confused
- Thinking no one else is having the same reactions as you
- Headaches, stomachaches, or other body pains
- Very young children may become clingy, fearful, have tantrums, or resume behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- School aged kids may get into fights, socially isolate, or have trouble with schoolwork
- Adolescents and teens may use alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or prescription medications to try to cope

Steps to help children and adolescents after trauma

- Let children know there are people helping keep the community safe. It's a good opportunity to show children that when something scary happens, there are people to help.
- Limit exposure to television and social media content about the disaster; repeated exposure to frightening or intense images increase distress.
- Maintain routines at home and school as much as possible
- Spend family time together; this can increase feelings of safety and provide helpful opportunities to talk and share.
- Ensure they have regular meals and get good sleep every night.
- Educate them to avoid using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs to manage distressing emotions.
- Find healthy ways to relax, such as music, reading, sports, and other hobbies.



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- Stay connected with friends, family, classmates, and neighbors to give and receive support. Helping one another aids in healing.
- Use words and concepts children can understand. Gear your explanations to the child's age and understanding.
- Make time and encourage kids to ask questions. Don't force children to talk about things unless and until they're ready.
- Give children honest answers and information. Children will usually learn if you're making things up, which can diminish their trust in you.
- Be prepared to repeat information and explanations several times. Some information may be hard to accept or understand. Asking the same question over and over may also be a way for a child to ask for reassurance.
- Acknowledge and validate the child's thoughts, feelings and reactions. Let them know that you think their questions and concerns are important and appropriate.
- Remember that children tend to personalize situations. For example, they may worry about their own safety and the safety of immediate family members, friends and neighbors.
- Be reassuring, but don't make unrealistic promises.
- Help children find ways to express themselves. Some children may want to talk about their thoughts, feelings or fears. Others prefer to draw pictures, play with toys, or write stories or poems to help them cope.
- Be aware of how you respond to the tragedy and talk about it with other adults. Children learn from watching parents and teachers.
- Children who have experienced trauma or losses in the past may be more vulnerable to prolonged or intense reactions. These children may need extra support and attention.
- Monitor for physical symptoms, including headaches and stomachaches. Many children express anxiety through physical aches and pains. An increase in such symptoms without apparent medical cause may be a sign that a child is feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- If the following are persistent or worsen over time, a child may need additional help: sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts or worries, preoccupation with concerns about the event, recurring fears about death, diminished school performance, or aggression. If these or other concerning behaviors persist, seek help from your child's pediatrician, family physician, or school counselor.

