

Helping Children and Youth Cope With Stressful Events



Children and youth may experience stressful events directly, or indirectly through media coverage or by overhearing others talking about the event. Both direct and indirect exposure can cause them to feel confused, frightened or insecure. They look to adults to explain what is happening and for guidance on what to do. Here are tips you can follow to help them cope.



REMAIN CALM AND REASSURING

How you react to stressful events affects children and youth around you. If they sense that adults are extremely anxious and worried, it may make them feel afraid and insecure. You can help them by staying calm and by reducing your own stress and anxiety. This will reassure them, and help them feel safe.



KNOW HOW THEY REACT TO STRESS

Stressful events can affect the way children and youth feel; think; and behave, especially if the event directly affects their family and community. Their reactions may vary depending on their age and understanding of the event.

Reactions Common to Children and Youth of All Ages

- Complaining of aches and pains such as headaches, stomach aches, and chest pains, without actually being sick
- Anxiety, fear, and sadness
- Changes in appetite
- Problems sleeping and nightmares
- Sudden changes in behavior

Reactions Specific to Pre-school Age

- Clinginess
- Aggressive behavior such as hitting, kicking and biting
- Bed-wetting, thumb sucking, constipation
- Being afraid of the dark, refusing to sleep alone
- Believing something they did caused the disaster

Reactions Specific to Early School Age

- Clinginess, fear of dark
- Avoiding school or having problems with schoolwork
- Problems with peers

Reactions Specific to Pre-teens & Teenagers

- Acting out of character: rebellious behavior, aggressive behavior, risk-taking such as drug use
- Withdrawal and loss of interest in usual activities
- Problems at home and at school
- Possible denial of their reactions, i.e., stating they are fine when they are actually upset

Tips for parents and adults who interact with children

Experiencing a stressful event can be traumatic for children and youth.

The information in this tip sheet will guide you how to help them cope.



MAKE TIME FOR ANSWERING THEIR QUESTION

Children may feel confused and afraid after the event, and may have many questions. Don't ignore their worries. Answer their questions and explain the facts in a way that they can understand. Let them express whatever they may feel and tell them it is okay to have such feelings. Spend extra time with them. For teens and youth, allow them to ask questions and inquire what might help them cope with this experience.



LIMIT EXPOSURE TO THE NEWS

Exposure to too much news about the event on TV, in the papers or through social media can also make children worried and confused. Try to limit the amount of news they watch, and watch the news with them so you can explain what is happening.

For teens and youth, you can ask what they know of the event from school, their friends, or the media. Have open conversations about the event and its effect, but limit the time you spent on these discussions. Do not let the event take over their life, remind them about the good things in life worth thinking and talking about.



KEEP FAMILY ROUTINES & BE FLEXIBLE

Routines, such as family meals, regular time for schoolwork, chores and friends, give a sense of normalcy and control. Try to maintain familiar routines as much as possible, but be flexible so you can adapt to the changed circumstances. This will help both you and your children cope. Temporarily relax rules and expectations if necessary, including letting your children sleep with the light on if they are scared, or sleep in your room temporarily if needed.

Healthy routines help ensure that children and youth eat well, sleep enough, and get some physical exercise. For teens and youth, model this self-care by engaging in healthy habits yourself.



ENCOURAGE THEM TO STAY CONNECTED

Being connected with adults, other family members, and friends can help children and youth feel that they are protected. It can also help them support one another and to ask for help should they struggle or feel unsafe.



KNOW WHEN AND WHERE TO SEEK HELP

For children and youth having difficulty coping, call NYC WELL. They help connecting with services: counseling, crisis intervention, peer support and referrals to care. It is free, confidential and available 24/7 in English, Spanish, or Mandarin / Cantonese, with translation + 200 languages. Talk: 1888-NYC-WELL (1888-692-9355) Text: WELL to 65173 Chat: nyc.gov/nycwell

**You are not alone.
Help is available!**

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