



Helping Your Children Recover from a Catastrophic Event

by

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As adults we have a history of loss, grief and recovery. We often use information based on past experiences to make determinations about the present situation and use logic to help us remain calm and resolve problems. Whereas, children lack experience and tend to process stressful situations purely through their emotions which are often exaggerated.

Children pick up cues from the adults around them. If they hear words and see behavior that indicates hopelessness, they will act accordingly. If in turn, they're unable to express their emotions verbally or lack adequate support and encouragement, they may resort to negative behavior that can range from nightmares to outright rebellion that include self-destructive behavior.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "Immediately after a disaster, children and adolescents have these common emotional behavioral reactions.

- Ages 1 to 5: Disobedience, fear of being separated from caregiver, and difficulty sleeping.
- Ages 6 to 10: Disobedience, fear of returning to school, and difficulty concentrating on tasks.
- Ages 11 to 18: Rebellious behavior, antisocial behavior and depression."

It's important to sit together and listen to their fears and doubts without being judgmental or downplaying their concerns. Due to their inability to express their emotions or inexperience in starting a conversation, we may need to help them. A good way to begin a dialog is by using open-ended questions such as, "you seem to be having a lot of nightmares. You've woken up screaming a few times this week. I would like to help you. Tell me what you're feeling."

Points to keep in mind are:

- Let them know (in age appropriate terms) how you're feeling about the situation and encourage them to share their feelings with you.
- Reassure them that you're available to answer their questions and help them with their fears.
- Reassure them that the situation will pass and talk about plans for the future. Encourage them to participate in the discussion.
- Establish a routine even if it's not exactly the same as the previous one. This provides structure and a sense of security.

During and shortly after a disaster or crisis, children and adolescent's fears are exceptionally high. This is a crucial time for parents and caregivers to give them extra attention and reassurance. Answering their questions truthfully without being vague or dismissive and in age appropriate terms, will enable them to deal with their fears in a constructive way and look to the future with hope.

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