

HELPING CHILDREN AFTER TRAUMA

Traumatic experiences can trigger a very wide range of symptoms for kids. Because they have an underdeveloped 'emotional vocabulary', children sometimes express their emotions in immature and inappropriate ways. Parents need extra patience and love for kids at this time, which can be especially hard if our own emotions are still raw and stressed.

With the uncertainty that comes with traumatic events, kids may be fearful of repeat events and of being left alone. They may worry about their safety and their future welfare. They may also be worried about other people and pets, and even worried about you, especially if they have seen you upset. After a big shock or a prolonged period of stress, children may be easily triggered into a fearful state. Some of the symptoms may be:

Regression

- Bedwetting
- 'Going backwards'
- Thumb sucking

Sleeplessness

- Bad dreams
- Scared of going to bed
- Wanting to sleep with you

Somatic responses

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Stomach aches

Withdrawal

- Especially older children
- A sense of responsibility, even for parents
- Not wanting to talk
- Not wanting to disturb you
- Watching you closely

Guilt

- For somehow being responsible for the event
- For how they behaved in it – especially if they saw you really concerned for them
- For enjoying the excitement

WHAT HELPS

Comfort

Trust your instincts and your heart! You represent safety. Your arms around your kids and your reassurance is absolutely what they need the most. Little kids best handle stress and upset when there is a 'big person' who enters into their world and takes it seriously.

- Closeness
- Cuddles
- Time together
- Familiar objects, such as soft toys, blankets, or a picture of you
- Allowing them to talk

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Stress-handling tools

Stress can be alleviated to an amazing extent by what we do physically. Panic can be greatly relieved by deliberate, slow breathing and stretching exercises. When children seem stressed, think about something physical you could do with them.

- Walking
- Back rubs
- Having a bath
- Eating good food rather than sugary snacks
- Avoiding caffeinated colas

Other things that can be great for easing stress are listening to music, or reading/playing a story to them. Older children will benefit from relaxation exercises. If you Google 'relaxation' there are hundreds of guides and downloadable recordings to help.

Don't neglect fun – which might seem strange in the midst of tragedy. Children have an amazing capacity to see the humour, fun and adventure even in terrible situations. Playing together and having jokes can be wonderfully therapeutic, and can detoxify the emotions attached to these events.

Perspective

One thing that adults usually have that children lack is an accurate perspective of danger. Overhearing dramatic re-telling of events or watching media coverage may excite fears that are greater than they need to be. "It was really scary, but we are safe now", is a message that may need to be repeated often.

- Truthfulness
Don't deceive your kids, because they really need to trust you at this time. You can't say there won't be any more scary events but you can reassure them that you will be there for them.
- Facts
School age children can understand a lot about what is going on. As well as the effects of large scale events (natural disasters, illnesses, etc), talk about things like what the police, army and civil defence are doing. They may not know about things like insurance and government assistance. They may be greatly comforted to know about all the volunteers and the public spirit that comes out in a community at times of disruption.
- Limiting media
As adults, we understand that media news coverage tends to exaggerate, but children may be alarmed. Though the media have handled the event generally very well, it would be wise to limit the amount your children are exposed to news coverage. If you watch the news together, you might like to give your interpretation and perspective.

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- Interpretation
Give your reassuring 'big picture' interpretations of the event to your children.
- Invite questions from them
Be prepared to handle your kids' questions. It is OK to say you don't know the answers, but offer to find out for them.

Emotional insights

Your children may never have experienced such strong or dismaying emotions before. Repeatedly reassure them that big feelings are understandable after a scary experience, but the feelings will pass. Where your insight will be especially valuable is helping them label their emotions – "You normally don't yell and act angry like this. I think it's because of the upset from [the event]. It stirs us all up." "You're feeling sick... and we will certainly take you to the doctor if it doesn't get better soon, but sometimes people feel really sick after a fright like the one we have had".

- A key insight – emotions tell us about what has been, not about what will be
- Emotions cannot be commanded to go
- Emotions don't always tell us the truth
- Emotional upsets take time to get over
- Reassure children – things like bad dreams are normal and go away
- Talking about how they are feeling helps
- Assure them not to feel ashamed of their emotions, especially when talking to parents

Reassurance

Let your kids know that;

- They are safe
- There are police, ambulances and so many others that are there to help if needed
- In emergencies, there are so many good people who will help you
- You have confidence in them to handle difficult times
- That there is a Plan B and Plan C – "We can always go and stay with Grandma if our house needs to be repaired." "If you are at school in an emergency, you know your teachers will look after you."
- That they can trust you – you know what to do, and that you will never abandon them

Preparation

Kids love to know that you are prepared for emergencies. It greatly reduces anxiety if they have a plan of what to do.

- List people they can contact if they need to
- Rehearse and recite plans

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- Ask them to give you their ideas (while giving reassurance that you know what you are doing)
- Show them the emergency advice online and in the media
- Let them know that you trust them to do well in an emergency

Knowing what's happening

Keep kids in the loop. They may be anxious to let you out of their sight but you may be very busy at this time and not have a great deal of time to spare for your children. Let them know what you are doing and where you will be. Let them know how they can contact you. Have reassuring reunions at the end of the day when you tell them what you have been doing.

Hope

Tell stories about good times ahead, about sports and hobbies and activities that are on hold at the moment, but they will happen again. Acknowledge things are tough at the moment, but tough times don't last. Let them see your optimism and confidence.

Allow them to express and grieve without minimising or dismissing. Turning their concerns into prayers, or hearing you echo back to them what they are feeling, can make them feel truly heard and loved, and help them through this time.

Routine

One of the best things to help kids get over an upset is returning to routine. Getting back to school will help. Bedtime routines help them settle peacefully – prayer, stories and a debriefing.

Kids form routines readily – maybe you could establish some new ones now to show that life is settling into a predictable pattern.

Modelling calm

This is hard, because adults may be upset too. But it is amazing how much extra courage we can draw up when we know our children are looking to us for reassurance. When we are obviously upset or anxious, explain your emotions to your children – it may help them understand their own feelings.

Most of us enjoy telling a good story, but avoid overly dramatic re-telling on the phone if your children are listening (and they are *always* listening!).

Normal boundaries

It is appropriate during this time to be a little gentler on our children, to tolerate their emotions and behaviour. But children do feel more secure when they know that their world – and their behaviour – is under adult supervision and control. Your boundaries help them feel protected:

- Restore order

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- Restore self control
- Set expectations that they can handle themselves
- Reassure

Set plans to return to regular bedtimes and chores if these have been disrupted

Post-traumatic stress

Traumatic events can replay over and over in the mind. This will happen when something 'triggers' the memory like a smell, sound or picture that reminds them of the event.

- Give insight into the triggers – "That loud noise reminded of you the earthquake."
- Add to the picture – At safe times, get them to tell the story or to draw pictures. As they relive it in their mind, in your safe presence, add to the picture things that take away some of the terror
 - "... but you were safe"
 - "... and you handled it well"
 - "... and it was amazing how people helped"
- Include positive problem solving as they re-tell the story
 - "How would you handle it differently?"
 - "What would make things safer?"
 - "What will be different next time if there is ever a next time?"

Get professional help

You can usually expect the upset and distress to get less, though there is no 'timetable' to recovery for an event like this. If their behaviour or emotions seem to continue to give problems, then consult your doctor, counsellor or psychologist.

Adapted from an article by John Cowan
<https://www.theparentingplace.com/contributor/johncowan/>