

Helping Children and Teens Respond to a Disaster or Emergency

While you can't control a stressful situation, you can control how you **REACT** to it.

Respond. How you respond to the stress of a disaster or emergency can affect how your child reacts. Reacting in calm and productive ways (e.g., discussing things calmly, problem-solving, looking after yourself) will model good coping skills. It will help your child feel calmer and cope better.

Eat at regular times to give your body the energy and nutrients it needs to cope in stressful situations. Drink water throughout the day to stay focused. Take time to eat meals with your children, friends, and family. Sharing a meal can increase your sense of belonging and connection with others.

Activity. Make time to be physically active with your child, go for a walk, dance, or play. Physical activity is a good way to connect with your child and can help reduce their anxiety and stress.

Connect with other caregivers, families, and peers in the community. This will help you and your child to respond and cope better with a disaster. Find ways to help others when you can and accept help from others when you need it.

Talk. Let your child know it's okay to talk about what is going on. When they ask questions, listen without interrupting and answer honestly at a level they can understand (e.g., "There's a fire near our town. People are working hard to put it out. We're safe and far away from it."). If you don't know an answer to their question, it's okay to say that.

Stress Reactions

Children react to disasters and emergencies differently than adults do. Any change in a child's environment or routine can make them feel insecure, scared, or confused.

Common stress reactions

Children under 5 years may:

- cry more than usual
- have changes to eating habits
- complain about aches or pains
- be confused easily
- want to be held more
- be afraid to be alone
- have trouble talking (e.g., stuttering)

Children 6 to 11 years may:

- go back to doing things they did when younger (e.g., thumb sucking)
- have changes in sleeping patterns (e.g., trouble falling or staying asleep, scared to sleep alone)
- have trouble concentrating
- complain of a headache or stomach ache
- be whiny, act out, or have aggressive behaviour
- ask about spiritual beliefs

Teens 12 years and older may:

- have changes in sleeping patterns (e.g., too much or too little)
- complain of aches and pains, headaches, or stomach problems
- become withdrawn or quiet
- act out or have aggressive behaviour
- question their spiritual beliefs
- feel guilty about surviving (if people have been hurt or have died)
- have trouble with existing medical problems

Tips to Help your Child or Teen Cope

- Let them know that all emotions are okay. Help them name their feelings and understand how emotions make their body feel.
- Encourage them to share their feelings and concerns. Listen and validate what they're saying (e.g., "You're feeling sad that you lost your stuffy. That doesn't feel good.>").
- Offer extra comfort and reassurance when they need it (e.g., stay with them, give hugs, let them know they're safe and that their safety is your main concern).
- Help them see the positive things that are happening (e.g., people are kind and are helping each other).
- Do things to stay busy (e.g., play games, colour, do puzzles, go for a walk).
- For younger children, it's important to have time to play and connect with other kids.
- Older children and teens might want to do things to help during a disaster. This will help them feel in control and provide them with a sense of purpose.
- Encourage teens to connect with their friends or other kids their age.
- Allow for quiet time. If your child is feeling overwhelmed, try to find a quiet spot for a few minutes where you can comfort them.
- Try to limit exposure to TV, radio, and social media. Hearing or seeing too much information about the disaster can be frightening, confusing, and overwhelming. If you do watch or listen to reports about the disaster with your child, talk about what they saw and heard and answer any questions they may have.



**Important Numbers
Available 24/7**

Health Link
811

Addiction Helpline
1-866-332-2322

Mental Health Helpline
1-877-303-2642



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