Helping Children and Families

Cope after a disaster

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Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress

- Re-experiencing and acting out the traumatic event
- Numbing of emotions and responsiveness (dazed expressions, showing little emotion)
- Avoidance (avoiding situations or reminders of the hurricane)
- Anxiety and hypervigilance (jumpy, scared)
- New fears unrelated to the event and being afraid of things that have been recently mastered
- Not wanting to leave a safe environment or trusting adult
- Interference with normal developmental tasks

How Can Parents and Other Adults Help Traumatized Children?

- Indicate you are available to listen to the child
- Use a calm tone of voice
- Reassure children that they will be safe

Even if it is difficult for the adult who also may be traumatized, it is important for the child to be able to feel safe. Younger children tend to think that the world revolves around them. So they might be afraid that something they thought or did caused bad things to happen.

- Don't minimize the child's feelings, as in *"Stop being a baby, don't cry."*
- Follow the child's lead
  - If the child wants to talk, listen
  - If the child wants to be held, do so
  - If the child is clingy, be patient
  - Allow children to show their fears; give support
  - Help children identify their feelings

When children are exposed to a traumatic event, they depend on adults, especially their parents, to protect them and to make sense of their world for them. However, loss of trust in adults and new fears are common after traumatic events. Parents need to be able to listen to their children and hear their concerns. They also need to help them feel safe. If parents are traumatized, it is important for them to find support for themselves and to reach out to others for support for their children.

Reactions to traumas are difficult to predict. They may occur immediately after the event or days and even weeks later. The disaster may remind children (or adults) about earlier traumas and can make the reactions more severe. Children's reactions to the traumatic event will be affected strongly by those of their parents.

Children's reactions to trauma vary at different ages. Some of the common reactions of children are listed on the next page. If any of the behaviors or symptoms do not lessen or go away over time, it is important to seek professional help. Interventions can be very helpful for traumatized children and allow them to get back on a normal developmental path. Without interventions, the symptoms are likely to worsen.

Possible Outcomes For Children and Adolescents Who Have Experienced a Disaster or Who Have Suffered a Significant Loss as a Result of a Traumatic Event

Children Ages Five Years and Younger:

- Fear of being separated from parent, clinging
- Crying, whimpering, screaming
- Trembling, immobility, aimless motion
- Frightened facial expressions
- Returning to behaviors shown at earlier ages like thumb sucking, bedwetting, no longer being toilet trained, fear of darkness

Children Ages Six to Eleven Years:

- Withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, decreased activity
- Depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt
- Disruptive behavior, outbursts of anger and fighting
- Refusal to attend school, changes in school performance and inability to pay attention
- Changes in usual behaviors and/or regressive behaviors – returning to earlier behaviors
- Irrational fears, nightmares & other sleep problems
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches) with no apparent physical cause
- Showing little emotion; feeling numb

Adolescents Ages Twelve to Seventeen Years:

- Flashbacks, nightmares and other sleep disturbances
- Emotional numbing
- Avoidance of any reminders of the event
- Risk taking behaviors
- Substance abuse
- Problems with peers/antisocial behaviors
- Changes in usual behaviors
- Changes in school performance, academic decline
- Physical/psychosomatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches) with no apparent physical cause
- Depression
- Suicidal avoidance
- School avoidance
- Confusion, dissociation
- Showing little emotion; feeling numb

How Can Parents and Other Traumatized Adults Help Themselves?

It is very important that adults help themselves when they are traumatized and engage in self care. If they are also parents, getting support and assistance will be particularly important as they will be better able to listen to their children and give them the understanding and support that they need to heal.

What adults can do:

- Return to day-to-day structure (routines) as soon as possible
- Spend time with others
- Seek out support from friends and colleagues
- Keep a journal
- Participate in activities that may distract you or feel good to you
- Try to be patient with others who are also under stress
- Give yourself permission to feel moody, nervous, or blue
- Try not to make any major life changes during a stressful time
- Make as many daily decisions as possible to have a feeling of control over your life
- Try to rest and eat balanced and regular meals

Helping Children and Families Cope with a Disaster

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