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National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

What parents and caregivers can expect in the short term after a disaster or community trauma

Resource summary

- All children will need the continuity and stability of a caring family environment, with safety, trust, affection and relationships with others, regardless of their experience.
- Caring parents and a stable routine are the main things a child needs to be okay after a traumatic event.
- Children of all ages can be profoundly affected by disasters or a traumatic event. Children need special attention.
- Children's reactions following disaster are significantly influenced by their age and developmental stage, how their parents and other adults around them support them, the availability of a broader social network and their subsequent sense of safety, security and predictability.
- Most children will recover from a traumatic event over time, with some experiencing positive change for the better.
- Some children will continue to experience difficulties.
- Some children will seem fine at first, then be distressed at a later point.
- Children may experience distress even if they did not experience the event personally.
- Parents will also be dealing with their own grief and loss, and may need increased support to provide stability and routine for their children.



Take care of yourself

During the first weeks and months after a disaster or traumatic event, the intensity of feelings you and your children experience may fluctuate but should eventually become more manageable. Sometimes intense or distressing feelings may return when you are reminded of the event.

For some people, their distressing feelings and thoughts persist or get worse over time. If your distress is not going away or is interfering with your day-to-day life, you should discuss it with your GP and ask family and friends for support.

Lots of parents put themselves second and think that they will be okay. Research has shown that a parent's wellbeing is the strongest indicator for children recovering well from trauma. You are the most important person in your child's recovery. It is really important that you get the help and support you need, as this will help you support your child.

Parents often worry about the impact of the trauma on their child or children. The majority of children will return to their normal selves in the weeks and months afterwards. A small percentage of children will continue to experience long-term difficulties. If your child was directly involved in the event, or you lost a family member, loved one or pet or continue to have disruptions and difficulties then your child is more likely to need more time and support.

All children will need the consistency and stability of a caring family environment, with safety, trust, affection and connection with others.

This resource was co-produced by:



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What can I expect to feel?

You may continue to feel hopeless, overwhelmed, sad, angry or stressed even as things around you go back to 'normal'. For most people, these feelings take a few months to decrease and can take even longer if you have experienced an intense loss. It is important to connect with friends and other family members during this time, who may also be experiencing similar feelings, even if they don't show it.

Even if you and your family did not experience a direct loss during the event, your children will still need reassurance that they are safe. You can provide this through words, hugs, a consistent household routine and by encouraging them to play and do calming activities like colouring in, reading or crafts.

If you and your family experienced a direct loss during the event, it may take longer for feelings to resolve. You may also need additional support from others to cope.

Common reactions:

- Feeling overwhelmed or like you can't deal with day-to-day tasks.
- Shock, numbness, confusion or uncertainty.
- Intense sadness or grief, to the point of physical pain.
- Constant tiredness.
- No appetite or increased appetite.
- Feeling detached from the world around you or like things aren't real.
- Things you used to care about don't matter anymore.
- Despair or loneliness.
- High levels of stress.
- Anger, irritability or impatience.

You may also feel guilty that you survived if others around you lost their lives or important belongings. You may feel like you don't deserve help because others around you seem to be struggling more, or you may feel like you have to 'just get on with things' because others around you don't have time to help. It is important you seek support if you need it. Your children need you to be okay, because you are their source of safety and security.



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What can I expect from my children?

The majority of children will be fine. You can expect most children to recover over time from some initial sadness, worry and distress. All children will need continued reassurance, stability and support from you and those around them.

Some children will need extra support. Some children will continue to experience difficulties that may not get better by themselves. These children will need continued reassurance, stability and support from you. They may also need extra help to learn ways to cope with more severe symptoms. Your GP is the best place to start to get advice on this.

All children need time, love, patience, care and stable routine in the months following a traumatic event.

Reactions by age group

If you have younger children aged 0–5, you may see:

- increased tension, inability to relax or calm down
- increased sensitivity to small noises or movements
- loss of skills they recently developed, like feeding themselves or using the toilet
- increased fussiness and clinginess
- crying all the time or with increased intensity
- avoiding new things or new places
- avoiding or getting frightened by reminders of the event
- listlessness or seeming limp
- diminished interest in things or a 'spaced out' stare
- resistance to directions or requests
- sickness more often with colds, headaches or stomach aches
- playing out or drawing the event or 'playing disaster'
- self-directed blame for the event or making up stories why it happened.

If you have children in early primary school aged 6–8, you may see:

- mood or personality changes
- behaviours usually seen in much younger children
- increased tension and irritability
- increased sensitivity to small noises or movements
- increased clinginess or fear of being alone
- fear of the dark, nightmares or trouble falling/staying asleep
- diminished attention and being easily distracted
- reluctance to go to school or see others
- acting out by hurting others or themselves
- changes in normal eating patterns
- new fears or old fears coming back
- lack of eye contact or a 'spaced out' look
- anxiety or worry about lots of things
- efforts to avoid reminders of the event
- self-directed blame for what happened
- bodily aches and pains
- changes or delays in speech, memory or learning.

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Reactions by age group continued ...

If you have children in late primary or early high school aged 9–12, you may see:

- mood or personality changes
- increased tension, irritability or aggression
- increased sensitivity to small noises or movements
- diminished attention, or being easily distracted or 'blinking out' for longer periods of time
- reluctance to go to school or see others
- withdrawing into themselves, not speaking to others or seeing their friends
- acting out by hurting others or themselves, taking risks or getting into fights with others
- changes in normal eating and sleeping patterns
- new fears or old fears coming back
- lack of eye contact or a 'spaced out' look
- anxiety or worry about lots of things
- efforts to avoid reminders of the event
- changes or delays in speech, memory or learning

- a new awareness of death and mortality
- rebellion against or disdain for authority
- academic difficulties or trouble at school
- behaviours of a younger child (e.g. bedwetting, tantrums) or much older teenager (e.g. substance use, staying out late, promiscuous dating).

What should I remember?

All of these reactions can vary in intensity and how long they go on for. It is important to keep an eye on how you and your child are doing over time. Don't forget that you need to look after yourself. You and the other adults around your child are the key to their recovery.

Speak to your GP or seek help if any of the above symptoms are interfering with your or your child's ability to live your day-to-day lives or if they seem to get worse instead of better over time.



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