

Stress Reactions in Children

Even when the event is over, your child may experience some of the following strong emotional or physical reactions. This is very common and quite normal.

Remember to compare the following behaviors to the way the child behaved before the tragedy occurred.

Pre-School/Kindergarten (3-6)

- Child may withdraw from family and/or friends and become quiet or detached
- Child may cling to caregivers or favorite objects
- Child may regress to behaviors they found comforting earlier in life, or do the opposite and try to take care of you
- Child may show overwhelming fear of new situations or people
- Child may deny that a traumatic event has occurred
- Child may have nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Child may have trouble eating
- Child may fear of being alone

Pre-Adolescent (6-11)

- *Any of the above, as well as*
- Loss of interest in activities the child previously enjoyed
- Loss of interest in school, possibly drop in grades
- Violent play or fantasy
- Attention seeking behavior or getting into trouble
- Noticeable differences in moods
- Frequent complaints about physical ailments: stomach aches, nausea, headaches, or bedwetting

Adolescent (12-18)

- *Any of the above, as well as*
- Self criticism or blaming themselves for the incident
- Displaced anger
- Dangerous behaviors: truancy, drug & alcohol use, unsafe sexual activity, delinquency, running away, suicidal thoughts or attempts, intentional self harm, self-destructive or impulsive behavior. *When a teen displays any of these behaviors, s/he needs immediate assistance from caring adults, including those with training in assessing the level of danger.*

How to Help Children Cope with a Traumatic Experience

1. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your child. Make sure you are eating properly, getting enough sleep and talking to your friends and family about how you are feeling.
2. Children are smart! Make sure you are honest with them and tell them the facts appropriate to their age.
3. Listen to what they have to say and validate the normalcy of their reactions.
4. Allow them to grieve and mourn.
5. Reassure them that they are safe now.
6. Make sure children know where you are if you are going to be away from home.
7. Support each other as a family and use this as an opportunity to reunite.
8. If the event is being shown on TV or talked about on the radio, limit repetitive exposure to the event. Young children may believe that the event is happening over and over again.
9. Children will look to you to gauge how they should be acting. Try to present a calm and safe demeanor. Don't make them interpret your actions and emotions.
10. Try to get back to as regular a schedule as possible as quickly as you can. This sense of normalcy will comfort your child.
11. *No one knows your child better than you, and no one can tell you exactly how to talk with your child. The guidelines above are just that—guidelines.*

When to Contact a Professional

All of the reactions discussed are normal reactions to abnormal events. Generally these reactions should lessen in 2-3 weeks. If these behaviors persist beyond three weeks, please contact a mental health professional for help.

To talk immediately to a trained Mental Health Professional, ask for a referral to therapy or support groups, contact Johnson County Mental Health Center at 913-826-4200 or the JCMHC Crisis Line at 268-0156.

<http://www.jocogov.org/dept/mental-health/home>