

Employee Assistance Program

WELLNESS & SUPPORT

How to Help Children and Adolescents Cope with Traumatic Events

As we learned in the pandemic it can be really hard to insulate our kids from the impact of the news, especially as kids get older and attend playgroups, schools, or other group activities. Even if they don't hear about it outside of home sometimes kids hear us talking or simply notice our response to world or national events. There is no one way to address tragedies with children and how adults approach it depends both on the child's age and temperament.

Be sure you take time to process your own emotional response. Have your first reaction away from your child and take steps to support your own ability to cope so you can better care for others.

Keep Your Story Simple:

With young children under 6, parents should keep their stories simple. These stories should reinforce parents' beliefs. Perhaps parents want their children to know that a bad person hurt people. Maybe parents want their children to know that someone with a serious illness felt angry and hurt people. Stick with a one sentence story.

This might be a chance to change the conversation too. Try to focus on the positives, such as the heroes of the story.

Hug, Hold, & Positive Touch:

Positive or pleasant touch like a hug or a snuggle prompts our brains to release a hormone called oxytocin. Oxytocin makes you feel good and strengthens both emotional and social bonds while also reducing fear and anxiety. While positive touch is good for us anytime, it's especially helpful at times of crisis—when fear, anxiety and distress are heightened. You may notice your kids become more clingy or seek physical connection to you during stressful times—all signs a hug is needed!

Shield Them:

Parents should prevent their children from seeing pictures or the news because the images will stick with children longer than words. If children do see pictures, parents can show their children positive photos to counteract the negative.

If kids do ask about a news story, try not to shy away from discussing it with them. In fact, when we avoid a tricky topic we risk communication that it is off limits, allowing the fears surrounding the topic to grow. Instead, consider ways to engage in the topic that are supportive of your child and comfortable for you.

Let Kids Lead The Way:

Ask kids about what they know about the topic and what they'd like to understand more about. As you explore these questions with them try to suss out what they really want to know. This will help you identify the scope of what they are already thinking about and identify any misconceptions they may have.

You can prepare school-aged kids with your take on events so they have some context both for what happened and how it makes us feel. Then they can ask you questions to help them feel more secure if the topic comes up when you are not there.

Focus On The Helpers:

Mister Rogers taught us that, in times of crisis, we can look for the helpers to find hope and take comfort in realizing that there are caring people who are making a difference. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping,'" he famously said. Every day, in the midst of COVID-19, superheroes take on tremendous risk to themselves in the service of others and the greater good—amazing.

Focusing on helpers can also foster gratitude, which brings about its own emotional and physical benefits. Science shows that people who make noticing, feeling and showing gratitude a part of their daily routine experience a host of positive effects. Gratitude can not only help you sleep better—which is crucial for kids and parents—but it can also help you feel more positive emotions and be more compassionate and kind. It may even help boost your immune system.

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Cultivate Calm:

We all have to figure out a way to balance or manage stress, and there are different ways to help kids (and ourselves) cultivate a sense of calm. Spending time outdoors is naturally stress relieving, and you need only two hours per week to start feeling the benefits. Take a walk and "bathe" in the nature of a local forest, park, greenhouse or other space—anywhere you can find earth, sky and other living things.

Mindful moving and breathing exercises can also help kids feel calmer in the moment and navigate stressful situations. For example, try moving and breathing like lions to relieve tension and channel inner strength in you and your kids!

If kids are aware of the crisis, you can also sit together and breathe in worry or suffering, then breathe out hope for the world. This simple practice can help us process things that are really awful, bring us into the moment and support us in reconciling the good and the bad.

Common reactions in children/adolescents:

- Difficulty paying attention and concentrating
- Irritable or defiant
- Trouble separating from caregivers or wanting to stay at home
- Anxious about the future and how it may impact their lives
- Ruminating on the traumatic event
- Sleep and appetite routines may change

Many of these reactions are normal and will lessen with time. If these symptoms last for more than a month, please reach out to the EAP or another health care provider

Where Can I Find More Resources?

National Institute of Mental Health: Coping With Traumatic Events

www.nimh.nih.gov/copingwithtrauma

National Institute of Mental Health: Child and Adolescent Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/children

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Caring for Children in a Disaster

www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org

References:

"Helping Children and Adolescents Cope With Traumatic Events." National Institute of Mental Health (NIH), Publication No. 22-MH-8066

"Talking to Children about the Shooting." National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).

"How to Support Kids When the News Is Heartbreaking." Megan Fitzgerald, Tinkergarten.com, 5/24/22.

"How to talk to children about shootings: An age-by-age guide." Meghan Holohan, Today.com, 5/25/22.