

How to Help Kids Cope with Violence or Disaster

Children may have an intensely difficult time and a strong emotional reaction in trying to cope with a disaster or violent incident. This is true even if their only exposure is through news and other media coverage. Difficulties may be worsened by constant news reports of a traumatic incident.

As with any loss, they may experience feelings of grief, fear, isolation, anger, and loss of control. A change in behavior, appetite, and sleeping patterns is not unusual. They may become more irritable or act out their emotions in their play. Although most children recover from an emotional trauma within a few weeks, others may need help for weeks or months. Parents, family, school, church, and community may all play a role in times of traumatic stress. Some children may need help from a mental health professional. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) offers the following steps that parents and others can take to help young people recover from a violent or traumatic event.

After Violence or Disaster Parents and Family Should:

- Identify and address their own feelings. As much as possible, do this before you attempt to help the young people. Just like on a plane, in case of emergency, put on your own oxygen mask first. You will need your strength if you are going to be able to help them.
- Explain to the children what happened.
- Let them know:
 - You love them — It was not their fault
 - You will take care of them, as you are able; be honest — It's okay for them to feel upset

Do:

- Allow children to cry
- Allow sadness
- Let the children express their feelings through:
 - Talking — Writing — Drawing — Play

Don't:

- Don't expect children to be brave or tough
- Don't make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Don't get angry if children show strong emotions
- Don't get upset if they begin:
 - Bed-wetting — Acting out — Thumb-sucking

If Children Have Trouble Sleeping:

- Give them extra attention
- Let them sleep with a light on
- Let them sleep in your room (for a short time)

Try to Keep Normal Routines (Now is not the time for change, but may include):

- Bed-time stories
- Eating dinner together
- Watching TV together
- Reading books, exercising, playing games
- If you can't keep normal routines, make new ones together

Help Children Feel in Control:

- Let them choose meals, if possible
- Let them pick out clothes, if possible
- Let them make some decisions for themselves, when possible.

For additional information see:
magicstream.org

