

After Disaster:

A Guide for Parents & Teachers

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Children respond to trauma in different ways. Some may react very soon after the event; others may seem to be fine for weeks or months, then begin to show worrisome behavior. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma or has merely seen or heard about the event via the media or other sources, it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Preschool Age

Children from one to five years in age find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. In addition, these youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. For example, a preschooler may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." He may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place in which he feels safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn

behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it over and over.



Early Childhood

Children aged five to eleven may have some of the same reactions as younger boys and girls. In addition, they may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to "more

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childish" behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

Adolescence

Children twelve to fourteen are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and to abandon chores, school work, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug abuse. These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of peers are very important. They need to be thought "normal" by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

How To Help

Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing, or painting and to find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Reduce your expectations temporarily about performance at school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for usual chores.

Finally, acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing.

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For additional information, please contact:

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| Connecticut Helps, Office of Family Support | (860) 418-6262 |
| United Way Infoline | 2-1-1 |
| Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services | (800) 446-7348 |
| Connecticut Department of Children and Families | (860) 550-6484 |
| Connecticut Clearinghouse | (800) 232-4424 |



Information Provided by:
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Office Of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services
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