



HELPING YOUR CHILD AFTER A DISASTER

Common reactions in children:

Every child reacts differently. Your child may:

- Feel scared, worried or nervous;
- Be more clingy;
- Have difficulty sleeping, have nightmares or want to sleep in the same bed as you;
- Become more withdrawn;
- Have difficulty concentrating;
- Go back to earlier behaviours, such as bed-wetting;
- Be reluctant to go to school or out into the community;
- Express fear about their safety or the safety of family members; and
- Show no significant changes.

What you can do to help your child?

- Begin by questioning and listening. Open-ended questions are better than specific ones. It is better to ask, “How are you feeling about what happened?” than “Are you scared because of what happened?” You can be a bit more specific if general questions fail. Let your child tell you what they believe they know, how they learned it and how they are feeling. Don’t rush to correct or reassure. Allow them to finish their thoughts.
- Respond to what your child tells you. Their concerns may be specific or general, concrete or abstract, closely related to the crisis or related very little. Address what they are concerned about. Don’t overload children with information or solutions. Talk to them with ideas they can handle at their age. If you help them with their concerns today they will likely share more in the future.
- Children are very aware of their parents’ worries, fears or anxieties and may model your behaviour. As much as possible maintain calm with children. It’s okay to share some of your feelings with children but focus on your coping strategies.
- Share tips for ways you deal with different feelings. (e.g., “I remind myself that we are safe now.”)
- Be aware that new stresses may open old wounds. When a child is confronted with a crisis, losses and upsets from the past may be remembered. The child may or may not wish to talk about these old issues.

- It is normal for people to try to make sense of things when a serious loss occurs. Allow your child to share his or her ideas and speculations. Help them to separate what they know from what they are guessing about.
- Monitor TV watching and internet use (e.g., You Tube videos). Too much exposure to the event can increase a child's level of anxiety.
- Be willing to discuss what happened with your child and answer as many questions as you can. If you do not know an answer, acknowledge this. Use language appropriate to your child's age and level of understanding. Help your child learn the simple facts. Rumors and false information are often spread and can lead your child to worry more.
- When a crisis hits close to home we all feel vulnerable. Certain tragic events, while extremely upsetting, are statistically very rare. It can be helpful to remember that this type of event is very rare and almost certainly will not happen again in their neighbourhood.
- You may need to frequently provide reassurance to your child that you and they are safe. Give examples of things that are being done to ensure continued safety.
- Encourage talking or play expression of thoughts and feelings but do not force your child to talk about things if they do not wish to.
- Children deal with stress in many different ways and at different paces. While your child may not wish to talk today, He or she may wish to talk in weeks or days to come. Do checkups at least once a week until the crisis is over. Follow up discussions may be helpful.
- Stay in touch with teachers and others who provide care for your children.
- Help others and involve your children in this. Helping and volunteering can bring back a sense of control. It will show your children that you can still do something despite the event.