

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Helping Children Understand Disaster

How Disaster-Related Stress Affects Young People

Disaster related stress affects young people in several ways:

- Damage, injuries, and deaths that result from an unexpected or uncontrollable event are difficult for most young people to understand.
- Following a disaster, a young person's view of the world as safe and predictable is temporarily lost. This is true of adults as well.
- Young people express their feelings and reactions in various ways, especially in different age groups. Many are confused about what has happened and about their feelings. Not every child has immediate reactions; some can have delayed reactions that show up days, weeks, or even months later, and some may never have a reaction. Children's reactions are strongly affected by the emotional reactions of their parents and the adults around them.
- Young people can easily become afraid that a similar event will happen again and that they or their family will be injured or killed.

How Young People Show Stress

It is normal for young people to show signs of stress after a disaster. Young people show signs of stress differently at different ages or school levels. This article looks at three age groupings:

- Preschool years.
- Elementary and middle school ages.
- High school and teenage years.

Signs of Stress—Preschoolers

Signs that a preschool age child may be experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- Waking confused and frightened from bad dreams.
- Being reluctant to going to bed or refusing to sleep alone.
- Acting and showing behaviors younger than their actual age, such as whining, thumb sucking, bed wetting, baby talk or fear of darkness.
- Clinging to adults more than normal.
- Complaining often about illnesses such as stomachaches.
- Not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed.
- Being irritable.

Signs of Stress—Elementary or Middle School Age

Signs that an elementary or middle school age child is experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- Ongoing concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family.
- Irrational fears.
- Becoming extremely upset for little or no reason.
- Having nightmares and sleep problems.

© 2026 LifeWorks (US) Ltd.

- Experiencing problems in school, such as skipping school or misbehavior (e.g., loss of interest, withdrawal, and excessive need for attention).
- Complaining of headaches or stomachaches without cause.
- Not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed.
- Disruptive behaviors-outbursts of anger and fighting.
- Being numb to their emotions.
- Experiencing guilt or shame about what they did or did not do during the disaster Signs of Stress —High School Age.

Signs that a teenager may be experiencing normal, but high levels of stress may include:

- Feeling self-conscious about their feelings concerning the disaster.
- Feeling fearful, helpless, and concerned about being labeled "abnormal" or different from their friends or classmates (this may lead to social withdrawal).
- Experiencing shame or guilt about the disaster.
- Expressing fantasies about retribution concerning people connected to disaster events.
- Not having fun doing things they normally enjoyed.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Impulsive behaviors.
- Emotional numbing.
- Seeing the world as an unsafe place.

Helping Young People Understand a Disaster

Disasters can hit young people hard. It is difficult for them to understand and accept that there are events in their lives that cannot be controlled or predicted. When facing an unknown and potentially dangerous situation, young people usually look to adults for answers and help.

Talk with your young person at a level in line with their age. Children handle information differently at different ages. Preschool age children cannot handle as much information as teenagers.

Before you as an adult can help young people cope with a disaster, it is important for you to recognize your own natural feelings of helplessness, fear, and anger, if these exist. Until this occurs, you will not be able to give the young person the full emotional help they need. Nothing is wrong with letting young people know that you do not have all the answers. Things that can be done immediately include the following:

- Let young people know how you see the family situation improving, for example, your plans for their school, your work, and family housing.
- Communicate a positive "I'm not helpless" attitude, stressing that "we can get through this together."
- Ask for parenting or other help if the situation gets beyond your abilities and control.

These actions will start the healing process and help the young person to feel relief in knowing the family will regain control and restore their lives.

Parenting Tips for Helping Young People Manage Stress

You can use these practical parenting tips to help deal with managing high levels of stress in young people:

For Preschool Age Children

- Reassure young children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Talk with children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment.

- Let children know they can have their own feelings, which may be different from the feelings of others.
- Let children take their own time to figure things out.
- Do not expect children to be brave or ask them to pretend that they do not think or feel as they do.
- Give the preschooler small bits of information in relation to their questions. Too much information can confuse them.

For Preschool and School Age Children

- Return to former routines of bedtime and eating, etc. as soon as possible. If this is not possible, develop new routines. The structure of a routine provides security and assurance.
- Do not expect children to be brave or tough or not to cry.
- Do not minimize the event.
- Hug your children. Hugging lets your child know that someone is there for them.
- Allow special privileges, such as leaving the light on when they sleep.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, listen to music, and talk quietly.
- Children, just like adults, cope better when healthy. Make sure children are getting balanced meals, proper exercise, and enough rest.
- Find ways to emphasize to your children that you love them.
- Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control by letting them choose which clothes to wear, food to eat at meals, etc.

Activities to Help School Age Children Manage Disaster-Related Stress

Various activities can help young people manage stress. For Preschool and School Age Children

- Encouraging children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences. Hang the pictures at a level where children can see them easily. Talking about their drawings can help lessen feelings of stress.
- Playing with Play-Doh or clay is good way for children to release tension.
- Playing music is fun and valuable for children.
- Creating music with instruments or rhythm toys helps relieve stress and tension.
- Making puppets with the children and putting on a puppet show for family and friends or helping children put on a skit helps them tell about what happened.
- Don’t let children watch too much disaster-related television. Hearing about the events and seeing the tragic images over and over again will certainly raise their anxiety.

- Be aware of your own emotional reactions around your children. It is all right to share your feelings, but you must also show your children that you are in control of your emotions. Do not look for children for your emotional support.

For Teenagers

- Encourage your teenager to talk one-on-one with a trusted adult or in a small group of peers about the event.
- Generally, this is most successfully when you begin with general events, move to more event specific experiences,
- and follow with each person’s experiences with the disaster. Teenagers may wish to talk about values, moral issues,
- and the meaning of the disaster.

When Young People May Need Additional Help

Situations may develop when young people need additional help dealing with emotional after-effects of the disaster. Young people my benefit from help from a healthcare professional if the emotional stress associated with the disaster does not get better in a few weeks or when they:

- Display continual and aggressive emotional outbursts
- Show serious problems at school (e.g., fighting, skipping school, arguments with teachers, or food fights)
- Withdraw completely from family and friends
- Cannot cope with routine problems or daily activities
- Engage in vandalism or juvenile law-breaking activities
- Express suicidal ideas

Reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness. People have limits and sometimes need help when stretched beyond their limits. Seeking help from others can offer solutions that may not be known to you.

Where To Get Emergency Assistance

There are local, national, and government organizations that offer help during emergencies and disasters. If your property was not insured, these organizations may be able to help with rebuilding expenses as well:

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Register for disaster assistance by calling:
1-800-621-FEMA (3362)

http://www.fema.gov; https://disasterhelp.gov

The American Red Cross

1-800-HELP-NOW (1-800-435-7669)

http://www.redcross.org

National Hurricane Center

http://www.nhc.noaa.gov

The Salvation Army

http://www.salvationarmyusa.org

The United Way

2-1-1

http://www.211.org

A Disaster Recovery Center may be established in or near the community affected by the disaster. There you can meet with representatives of federal, state, local, and volunteer agencies.

Local churches, service organizations (such as the Kiwanis Club, Lions, or Knights of Columbus), large local employers, and local newspapers and banks may offer help.

Long-Term Recovery

After you have met your immediate needs and are ready to begin recovery, prepare by:

- Replacing important documents that were lost or destroyed such as your driver's license, auto registration, bank books, insurance policies, health insurance cards, credit cards, titles to deeds, stocks and bonds, wills, and other important documents.
- Saving receipts for all your expenses, or at least keeping a record of them. These will help both in filing an insurance claim and in claiming losses when you file your income tax return.
- Making lists of all property that was damaged or destroyed. These will prove useful for filing insurance claims or seeking financial assistance. Document as much of the damage as you can with photographs or video. Include as much of the following information as you can for each item:
    - Name, description, model, year, ID number
    - Where and when you bought it, and the price
    - Documentation such as a sales slip, canceled check, warranty, or correspondence with the manufacturer or retailer
    - Description of the damage and what caused it
    - Photographs that show the item before and after it was damaged

- Recalling as much as you can that's missing
- Letting utility companies know if they should stop billing to your home because you can't live in it.
- Getting in touch with creditors to request any needed extensions in payments.

Once you have met your immediate needs for food and shelter, and have begun the process of rebuilding, the emotional impact of your experience may begin to take its toll. Your Employee Assistance Program is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to help you deal with the feelings you may have after surviving this major, life changing event.

Remember that wherever you are, your confidential **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is available and accessible 24/7/365.

Contact your EAP at **1.866.468.9461** or visit **workhealthlife.com/us**.