



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

HELPING STUDENTS AFTER A DISASTER

The death and destruction that accompany disaster events warrant special attention to communicating with children and adolescents. It is difficult to predict the kinds of psychological problems that children and adolescents will have; however, the following management plan may help minimize later difficulties:

The death and destruction that accompany disaster events warrant special attention to communicating with children and adolescents.

- Issues of physical safety and security always take priority.
- Everyone has a different way of responding to trauma. It is not advisable to require the same response of everyone. Listen to your children's stories.
- Maintain daily routines to the extent possible. Now is not the time to introduce new routines. Familiar schedules can be reassuring.
- Your response to the disaster will affect your children's response; therefore, it is helpful to discuss your own reactions with other adults before talking with your children.
- Be alert to children expressing overwhelming feelings in discussions. Limiting time can help your children express what they wish and not more than they might wish they had.
- Discuss the event in an open honest manner with your children. Children might want to talk intermittently, and younger children might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Limit exposure to television and other sources of information about the disaster and its victims.
- Filter the information your child receives by restricting or limiting their access to media.
- Too much information about victims increases distress through over identification.
- Help children limit the extent to which they personalize or identify with the victims or the situation.
- To decrease over identification with the victims provide concrete information about how they differ from the people involved in the disaster.

- Remind students that they are safe.
- Explain that these are actually rare and unlikely events.
- Tell them that there are warning systems in place.
- Engage your children in

conversations of their choosing — not necessarily about their feelings or the scene. Talking about the normal events of life is central to health.

- Increase your children's sense of control and mastery.
- Encourage your family to discuss and plan disaster preparedness together. Let them plan an activity.
- Older children and adolescents may feel "stirred up". Helping them understand their behavior and setting limits can help.
- Some children may respond by being distracted or having trouble remembering things. These should be tolerated and understood.
- Be alert to changes in students' usual behavior (e.g., drop in grades, loss of interest, not doing homework, increased sleepiness or distraction, isolating themselves, weight loss or gain).

For Younger Children:

- Reassure younger children that they are safe and that their family and other adults will take care of them.
- Fearful younger children may need to touch base from time to time throughout the day during the early stages following a crisis.
- Acknowledge questions about the death and the destruction.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings: "You sound sad/ angry/worried..." "Are you sad/ angry/ worried?"
- Remind them that their feelings are okay.
- Acknowledge that you, too, may feel sad, angry, or worried.

For Older Students:

- Acknowledge the importance of peers in helping to reestablish normalcy.

Continued

- For many teens, their cognitive abilities are often greater than their emotional capacity to manage highly stressful situations. Expect emotional swings.
- Remember the importance of providing emotional support by “naming” the expectable reactions of

sadness, numbness, anger, fear, and confusion. Explain how seemingly inappropriate giddiness, laughter, or callousness often are used to distance ourselves from becoming overwhelmed.



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