



# Tips for Supporting Children in Disasters

Natural, manmade and technological disasters can have overwhelming effects on communities. Along with the physical destruction a disaster may leave, additional challenges to recovery may be invisible at first glance or remain unvoiced. To address these needs, Save the Children would like to share its psychosocial guidance with those who care for children.

A disaster is a frightening event for children of all ages and can leave your children or the children you care for feeling scared, insecure, sad and angry. It is normal for children to show some changes in their behavior, thoughts and feelings during and after such events. Included here are some reactions you may see in your child or the children you care for according to their age, as well as ways you can support them and yourself.

## Remember to take care of you!

*When parents and caregivers are stressed, anxious or upset, children feel this too. Children do better when the adults around them are confident, calm and reassuring. Take extra care of yourself—your own health and emotions—so that you will be better able to support children in your care.*

## Tips for Teachers

Schools are a tangible symbol of normalcy and hope for children and adults whose lives have been uprooted. Schools provide students and staff with a stable, familiar environment around which to center and organize life.

The routine and regular contact with teachers and friends helps children to reestablish a sense of safety and security. Your dedication, compassion and skills are needed now more than ever. The information provided here is intended to help you

think through new challenges you may encounter in the classroom as you work to provide support and learning opportunities in a very changed environment.

A disaster can have a profound impact on children and adults and can leave us feeling powerless and uncertain about the future. Some children and families may have been exposed to extreme danger, may be coping with significant losses or may have been uprooted and displaced from their homes and usual supports. As a teacher, you can play an important role in comforting your students, and in helping them sort out their thoughts and feelings surrounding the disaster and its impacts on their families and community. In the early phases, you and your school may be focused on locating and registering students, rebuilding classrooms that may have been damaged or finding ways to incorporate students displaced from other affected areas. New challenges will arise as your school and community move through the phases of rebuilding and recovery.

*In the midst of this, it is important that you take care of yourself and take the time to process your own feelings and losses—for your school and in your own life.* In the face of so many changes, it is unrealistic to expect yourself and students to go on as if it is “business as usual.” As a teacher, you like to be organized, in control of your classroom and able to cope with any challenge. But a disaster can cause huge disruptions in your work and life. You may have lost teaching materials or be adjusting to a new teaching environment, new staff and students and the rebuilding of your own home. You may find it harder to concentrate, or you might be experiencing difficult emotions in response to what has happened. To continue to be an effective teacher and caregiver for children, it is important to care for yourself first. Understanding and learning to be patient with your own recovery process will help you to better support your students.

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In stressful situations, children do best when their caregivers are calm, supportive and stable. Take the time to process your own experiences and feelings, and care for yourself so that you can best support your students in this difficult time.

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*Seek out all of the people and resources that support you in your life and work.* Working with your colleagues and school administrators to create a supportive and positive atmosphere at school is an important source of strength for moving forward together.

Take the extra time and effort to be there for each other. Talk with your fellow teachers about your experiences, fears and challenges, so that you can support and learn from each other. This is a good way to organize your own thoughts and reactions and prepare for addressing students’ concerns and questions.

**What are some of the challenges you are facing in the classroom right now?**

## Reactions of Children and Adolescents to a Disaster

Understanding and fully recovering from a disaster is a long process; it does not happen within a week, a month or even a few months. Experiences from other schools have shown that attention to the psychological needs of students after a major disaster is essential for ensuring that students can learn effectively. Although there may be a tendency to want to focus solely on the academics of learning, especially if children have missed some classes, it is important to create a space for children to understand their experiences and process their emotions in order to achieve academic success in the long term.

## TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

As children return to school, you may notice some changes in their behavior, emotional expression and school performance. Children may be more fearful of returning to school and have more difficulty separating from their parents or guardians. They may be more aggressive or withdrawn, and may tend to cry or become more easily upset as a result of their experiences in the disaster. As children get back into the routine and structure of school, most will feel better in time. Children who may have suffered great losses or been exposed to danger and threats to their life or safety may require extra support. Common reactions of children and adolescents to a disaster are:

### Preschool Children

- Sleeping and eating problems
- Temper tantrums and irritability
- Being defiant, frequently saying “no!”
- Getting upset over small injuries
- Being afraid the disaster will happen again
- Separation anxiety
- Increased fearfulness
- Being less active or playful than usual
- Acting quiet or withdrawn
- A return to bed wetting, thumb sucking or earlier behaviors
- Asking questions over and over again, sometimes about small details of what happened

### School-Age Children

- Clinging to parents/guardians
- Fearful of going to school
- Fatigue from sleep difficulties or nightmares
- Change in eating habits
- Difficulty concentrating and staying on task
- Poor school performance
- Aggressive behavior, fighting
- Anxiety, crying spells, sadness and grief
- Feeling guilty, or to blame for bad things that happened
- Withdrawal from peers
- Losing interest in usual activities

### Adolescents

- Preoccupation with the disaster
- Feeling helpless or powerless
- Being judgmental and critical of adults
- Extreme mood swings
- Acting invincible
- Risk-taking behaviors (drugs, alcohol, sex)
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Acting irritable and easily agitated
- Physical aches and pains
- Withdrawn from friends
- Loss of interest in usual activities

If you take a moment to reflect, steps you've taken in the past to support your students may come to mind, and you can remember decisions you've made or actions you've taken that have made a difference in the lives of individual students.

## What You CAN Do for Your Students

Helping children cope and learn in the aftermath of a disaster requires creativity, flexibility and adaptability. You may have already taken measures to help your students heal and learn better. Here are some things you can do to create a classroom environment that helps children express their feelings and adjust to their new surroundings:

### Establish Safety & Control

- Have a supervised safe place within the school where students can go to receive support or sit quietly as needed.
- Increase children's sense of control and mastery by letting them make choices that affect their day and help in planning activities.
- Be available to talk one-on-one with your students; let them know you are there to listen.

### Set Up Routine & Normalcy

- Maintain classroom routines.
- Peer support is important; create opportunities for students to work and play together.
- Plan activities, rituals and celebrations for students to look forward to—especially around holidays.
- Give students opportunities to engage in conversations of their choosing, not solely about the disaster.

### Normalize & Validate

- Reflect what students say and validate their feelings and experiences.
- Discuss some of the normal thoughts and feelings they may be experiencing.
- Sometimes children can be giddy (inappropriate laughing), callous or aggressive as a way of avoiding difficult emotions. Help them to be compassionate with each other and themselves.
- Reassure students, particularly younger students, that they are safe at school and that their parents or guardians and other adults will take care of them.

### Help Children Move toward Positive Action

- Help students reframe anger or despair by focusing on positive things.
- Encourage students to develop positive methods of coping with stress and fears, and help them identify which strategies fit each situation. Begin with helping them to identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were scared or upset.
- Encourage students to contribute safely to rebuilding their community and school, and consider class volunteer projects.

*Help students to identify the things in life that they understand better or appreciate more since the disaster. A sample activity is creating a booklet for Thanksgiving with pages that students fill with the things they are thankful for. Similar booklets could be created helping students to understand their new gains, strengths and resources.*

### Help Children Understand and Learn from the Disaster

- Learning about natural disasters (e.g., what causes a hurricane/tornado/etc., how experts track them) helps children, especially middle school children, to gain mastery over the event.
- Incorporate disaster-related information into the curriculum, using information and lessons from the disaster in your instruction.

### Encourage Creativity

- Use creative arts to help children express their emotions (art, drama, music, photography, writing, etc.). This can be very helpful for children who are not ready to talk about their emotions, or who culturally might not feel comfortable talking.

### Classroom/School Project Ideas

- Fundraise for relief and recovery efforts.
- Assist with school and community clean-up.
- Plan disaster education activities for the community.
- Create a play space or art space for younger children to express their feelings.
- Thank rescue workers with care packages or letters.
- Gather oral histories to learn about other communities and how they coped.
- Research facts relating to the disaster and recovery.
- Establish pen pals with other schools or with students who are displaced to other schools.
- Connect with other communities that have experienced crises to learn about their recovery.

## Knowing When Children Need Extra Support

Although most students will begin to feel better and recover with good support from teachers and parents or guardians, some children may need extra help. If one of your students is showing more serious problems that do not show improvement over time (three months is a good age), that child may need a referral for more specialized support. Keep in mind that some students may have had previous learning disabilities or emotional problems, which may be made worse by the stress of the disaster. They may need extra time, attention and care. Learn about your school's referral system for children in need of extra care and support.

### When to Refer

Some problems that may indicate a child needs referral to a professional counselor are:

- Aggression and fighting
- Excessive anxiety and crying
- Students who seem apathetic or numb to disaster-related events
- Excessive withdrawal
- Extreme fears that interfere with daily functioning
- Excessive hyperactivity
- Marked and prolonged changes in school performance
- Risk-taking behavior in adolescents (reckless behavior, substance abuse, self-injury)
- Any child who talks about hurting or killing themselves or others, or who tries to hurt themselves. Take children seriously if they talk to you about suicide and seek help immediately.

### Children's Safety and Protection

*After a major disaster, it is important to pay particular attention to child safety and protection. If your school is located in an area that suffered damage during the disaster, be watchful of children during recess as well as before and after school. Make sure that they don't play near debris or other health hazards. You may find that your school environment is being visited by many strangers—construction and repair crews on school grounds, deliveries of new equipment or donations, and others on grounds that you don't recognize. Be aware of these strangers and any interactions they may have with your students. When children are released for the day, be sure they leave school grounds on the school bus or in the care of a family member.*

*As families may find themselves in unfamiliar territory in a new city and community, it may be difficult for these children and parents/guardians to know the safe areas for children to play. Find ways to help your students and their parents/guardians know important information about the community to stay safe. Remember, as a trusted adult in the lives of your students, you can play an important role in helping children who are experiencing domestic violence, abuse or neglect in their homes or communities. Use the open and trusting relationship you have with your students to explore any suspicions you may have of abuse or neglect, and make the appropriate referrals to the school social worker, counselor and/or the authorities.*

Don't forget that while you continue taking care of your students and supporting your coworkers, you'll need to take care of yourself. Identify the ways in which you can give your mind a break when you're feeling overwhelmed during the work day. Spend time planning your personal strategies for self-care and implement them.

## Taking Care of Yourself: Strategies to Cope and Stay Strong

Everyone faces adversity sometime in their life, and we learn and grow from these experiences. A disaster can be an overwhelming event at any age, but we all have inner resources—our own resiliency—and outer resources we can call on to see us through. Life-altering events are opportunities to reflect on where we have been and where we are going, and the things that bring meaning to our lives. Take some time to think not only about the losses and changes brought by the disaster, but also the gains from the experience. Perhaps you have learned not to “sweat the small stuff” or to be more flexible. Perhaps you have gained new friendships or become closer with neighbors or co-workers. Take time to reflect, understand and come to terms with this important event in your life, and then you will be better able to help children and others to do the same.

Taking care of yourself may require some creativity and adaptation. Some of the activities you used to do or places you used to go may no longer be accessible. Think about the things that have helped in the past, and where you can, try to put those in place today. Think of new things that might help you feel better day to day. Often it is the pile up of small stresses that make us feel overwhelmed; similarly it can be the small ways you learn to relax and stay healthy that will keep you resilient during this difficult time.

You will feel the effects of stress in your body. When under stress it is common to feel headaches, muscle tension, stomach upset and fatigue. To take care of yourself, remember...

- Eat regular and healthy meals
- Give yourself adequate time to rest and recover when you're sick
- Get enough rest
- Exercise
- Do things that you enjoy, take time for fun and relaxation
- Take breaks from the work and stress to release and recharge

### Taking Care of Your Mind

You may find you have many things on your mind and long to-do lists. Your mind also needs care and rest. Even for just 15 minutes a day, give yourself space for quiet reflection and a time away from people, phones and demands so you can refresh.

- Find activities that help you relax, such as breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, walking, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to music or spending time in nature.
- Try to keep perspective: Recovery is a long process, but every day there are changes and improvements. Try to see the positives each day.
- Consider the extraordinary changes and challenges you have experienced and be patient with yourself.
- Focus on the small things you can do to improve the day to day, rather than putting your time and energy into things that are out of your control.
- Explore your creativity to make meaning of what has happened. Express your thoughts and feelings in new ways, such as journaling, painting, drawing, sculpting or music.
- Give yourself time for self-reflection and understanding. Practice spiritual self-care in the way that works best for you.

### Keep in Touch with Friends and Family

Try not to isolate yourself and dwell on your feelings alone. More than ever, surround yourself with the important and caring people in your life.

- Identify the people, activities, places and things that are a comfort to you, and seek them out on a regular basis.
- Stay in touch with the important people in your life and accept their support and kindness.
- Talk with others who face similar challenges to know you are not alone and that others understand. Share the lessons you've learned for coping with the new challenges in your lives.
- Talk with your clergy, counselors or others who can provide comfort and help.

Reaching out to and helping others can help to counter your own feelings of helplessness. Small things—an encouraging word, running an errand or watching a child for someone, or being there to listen—are ways you can make a difference. Remember to be aware of your limitations too, and know when you need to focus more on caring for yourself.

### Outlets for Emotions

Overwhelming emotions are common following major events, big changes and ongoing stress. Take time to deal with and to express your own feelings.

- **Crying:** It's all right to cry and to laugh. You may find yourself crying in front of your children. Explain that you feel sad sometimes too, that it's okay to cry, and what you do to feel better. This can be an opportunity to help children to understand and manage their own sad feelings.
- **Anger:** Many people feel very angry after a disaster—the situation feels unfair and unjust and recovery and rebuilding can be fraught with problems. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, be careful of intense anger and aggression that can hurt others and cause problems at home or on the job. Find healthy and safe ways to express frustration and anger, such as taking a walk or doing some physical activity.
- **Shame and Blame:** After a disaster, many people think about the things they wished they had done, or done differently. In a time of crisis, you make the best decision you can with the information you have at the moment. There was no way to know how things might turn out. Forgive yourself, let go and move forward.
- **Survivor Guilt:** Many people who survive disasters feel guilty that they, their families and homes survived when others lost so much. Feelings of guilt are actually a reflection of your compassion and human ability to feel others' pain.

### Getting Back to Work

The return to work can be both a relief and a challenge. Work helps give a regular structure to life, and something meaningful and productive to look forward to. It can also be difficult to get back to work when your life may still be disrupted, and you may lack energy, focus and concentration. Try these things to make the return to work easier:

- Create a welcoming work environment with things that remind you of the beauty in your life. Try placing photos, fresh flowers or meaningful objects on your desk.
- Have reasonable expectations for what you are able to do right now. Stay in touch with supervisors so they are aware of any challenges you are facing.
- Don't overwork—keep regular hours.
- At times when you find it hard to concentrate, try doing menial or repetitive tasks.
- Be patient and supportive with co-workers who are also under stress. Be there for each other.

### Be Aware of “Pitfalls”

With stress and trauma often comes a great deal of pain. Dealing with the pain is an important part of self-care and recovery. However, some avenues of coping with pain can cause greater problems. Be careful of pitfalls and dangerous ways of dealing with stress:

- Unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others
- Working too much
- Dangerous behaviors like risky sex or driving too fast
- Drinking or self-medicating with drugs to numb the pain. Remember that alcohol can lower your mood, cause mood swings and interrupt your sleep cycle. Alcohol and drugs can strain relationships.

### When to Seek Help

Continue to remind yourself that these normal reactions are to be expected during times like these. If you find that symptoms are greatly impacting your ability to function at home or at work, and if they get worse or persist for more than three months, consider talking things over with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist, social worker, or counselor. In particular, if you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, a mental health professional can talk to you about ways to relieve the overwhelming stress.

- Feeling constantly on edge or in danger
- Rage, extreme irritability, or intense agitation
- Severe anxiety, worry or feelings of panic
- Severe depression marked by the inability to feel hope or pleasure; a lack of energy and motivation; feelings of worthlessness
- Abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, and/or illegal drugs
- Repeated and intrusive memories or “flashbacks” of disaster-related events
- Emotional numbing—feeling “empty”
- Feeling extremely helpless

If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others, it is important that you seek help for your safety and the safety of others.

Even if you don't find yourself experiencing the types of things listed above, seeking the guidance of a mental health professional might be the right thing for you to do. These are extraordinary times that call for using all of our resources for strength and recovery. Give yourself permission to access those resources, to take care of yourself. Counselors, social workers and psychologists can work together with you to identify strategies and plans for staying strong and continuing to support your friends and family through this time.

### Let's Take a Breather...

Relaxation tools help you to center and calm yourself, even on stressful days, in order to keep your mind focused and your body functioning well. Breath is the key to relaxation. Shallow breathing can leave a person feeling cold or sweaty, lightheaded and with a fast heartbeat. As you learn to breathe slowly and deeply, your muscles automatically relax each time you exhale and your mind will become clear.

When you first start to practice relaxation, you may become more aware of negative or painful sensations. However, continuing to practice relaxation in a way that is challenging and tolerable can help you feel better. Remember, you don't have to change how you're feeling or change your environment—and you probably can't.

The key to relaxation is just to be quiet and present with whatever you're feeling and thinking in the moment. Try these basic techniques during your daily schedule:

- Identify a word, sound or phrase that you can repeat to yourself while sitting quietly with your eyes closed.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing, giving attention to inhaling and releasing each breath.

## TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

- Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and visualize yourself in a soothing place such as a garden or beach. Use all of your senses to place yourself in the scene.
- Try Progressive Muscle Relaxation: systematically tense and relax different body muscles from toes to head. Feel the difference between tension and real relaxation in your body.
- Slow down your breathing and count ten breaths, from ten to one, feeling more relaxed each time you exhale.
- Stand up and stretch. Rotate your shoulders and your head.
- Take a moment to walk around the room or down the hall.

### Important Numbers

**I-800-273-TALK** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

**I-800-656-HOPE** National Sexual Assault Hotline

**I-800-789-2647** National Mental Health Information Center

A confidential hotline to speak with trained mental health professionals who can assist with information and local referrals