Tips for Parents and Caregivers

Stressful events can be difficult for children to understand and to manage. Children’s reactions to stress and trauma are unique to each child, and they are also affected by his or her age and developmental stage. It is important to remember that the way you handle your own reactions will directly affect how well your children manage their reactions to stressful events. Helping your child feel safe by providing reassurance and routine is critical during stressful events.

Understanding some of the responses of a child to stressful events can help adults prepare for how they might respond in a future event. It is normal to expect that your child may have problems with eating, sleeping, toileting, and schoolwork, and they may show unusual emotions and behaviors. There may be other specific reactions depending on your child’s age and level of development, like the following.

**Typical Reactions to Stress and Trauma**

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<th>Age</th>
<th>Child’s Response</th>
<th>Suggestion for Parent</th>
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| Under 3 years | • Can be more irritable, cry more than usual  
• May act like a younger child; they may return to bed wetting after they have been toilet trained  
• May be frightened to be without parents nearby | • Hold your child more often to reassure and soothe the child  
• Keep the child with parents and other family members |
| 3-5 years | • These children can remember events  
• May see death as a reversal condition  
• May be concerned that the event may occur again which can prompt angry or sad feelings | • Listen to and tolerate child’s retelling of event  
• Respect child’s fears; give child time to cope with fears  
• Increase monitoring and awareness of child’s play, set limits on scary or hurtful play  
• Let child try out new ideas to cope with fearfulness, such as extra reading time, of having a radio on or music in the middle of night to undo effects of fearful nightmares |
### What Can You Do For Your Child When Stressful Events Happen?

Families provide support and nurturing for each of the individual members. Families provide protection, love, security, a sense of identity and support for self-esteem for members, and a value system. These are important strengths to draw on during stressful times, and there is a lot that adults can do to help children cope with difficult times.

Adults often bring a lifetime of experience to stressful events, whether positive or negative, which will impact how we respond to new situations. Adults can draw on these experiences and know they can cope and move through a stressful event. Children, however, often do not have many life experiences to draw on. Your child will look towards important adults for guidance and reassurance. Adults need to be

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| 6-12 years   | • At this age, the child will begin to understand the permanence of loss  

• May become preoccupied with the trauma and talk about it over and over | • Encourage child to talk about traumatic events with family members  

• Provide opportunities for young person to spend time with friends who are supportive  

• Reassure that strong feelings, whether of guilt, shame, wish for revenge, are normal following a trauma  

• Do not offer false reassurance  

• Encourage pleasurable physical activities such as sports and exercise |
| Adolescence  | • Adolescents will realize that death is permanent, but may deny it  

• May engage in dangerous or risk taking behaviors as a way to deal with strong emotional reactions  

• May not be able to talk about intense feelings, therefore, the adolescent may emotionally withdraw and avoid social activity  

• May seek additional information about the event | • Be aware that even though the responses may be adult-like, the child may not actually be coping well  

• Encourage your adolescent to talk with friends, other family members, and individuals at school or in the community |
physically and emotionally available to children during stressful times. Other ways to help your child:
• Whenever possible, children should be in a familiar environment with people they feel close to.
• Create safe environments.
• Keep your child’s daily routines the same as much as possible. There is comfort in having things be consistent and familiar.
• Limit the amount of exposure to distressing media images.
• Provide brief and honest communication based on what you think your child can best manage.
• Honor your child’s need to talk about the event; try to have time alone together, when possible.
• Encourage your child to play sports and games with peers, when possible.
• Older children may withdraw emotionally or need time alone from the family. Try to encourage them to talk with friends.
• Let your child know how you are feeling, so they understand their feelings are also valid. At the same time, talk about what you are doing to cope and manage your feelings, and how as a family you all can help each other.

Where Can You Get More Help?
Many families can cope without outside help. However, there are times when reaching out is important – when the stress is too much or your child’s reactions are different or bigger than usual. Extended family members or religious leaders may offer needed help, but sometimes when the stress is ongoing, it can be helpful to seek out more information or to talk with a trained professional who can provide more support.
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