



## In the Aftermath

### Background

## MASTERS OF DISASTER®

# In the Aftermath

When disaster strikes, the importance of taking care of oneself is all too often forgotten or minimized. Disasters take a physical and emotional toll on everyone involved, be they at the scene or feeling its effects from a distance. Because children are no different, the lesson plans of *In the Aftermath* address the physical and emotional needs of young people and their families following a disaster:

- **Understand the Impact**  
Gives students an understanding of the impact of the disaster on families and the community through investigation, critique and directed use of reliable media sources.
- **Life, Loss and Grief**  
Helps students express their feelings and focus on positive memories and hopeful aspects of their new lives. As they move through the cycles of life, loss and grief, the lessons encourage them to develop and maintain an optimistic viewpoint.
- **Take Care of Yourself**  
Helps students set routines, develop healthful eating, sleeping and exercise habits and use a variety of tools to cope with change.
- **Reach Out to Others**  
Helps students who have been displaced by a disaster assimilate into unfamiliar surroundings and feel welcomed and supported by their new communities. Both are guided to accept and appreciate their differences as well as their similarities.
- **Build Back Better**  
Directs students to identify the needs of a community that must rebuild and plan ways to improve communities after a disaster and to lessen the damage of future disasters.

### *Masters of Disaster Connections*

Refer to the following modules in the *Masters of Disaster* series to learn more about a particular topic and to reinforce the objectives of the lesson.

- An essential part of preparing for any disaster is to be ready with plans, supplies and practice. *Be Disaster Safe* from *Masters of Disaster* empowers young people by teaching them to prepare for all hazards.
- To help young people understand science and safety, modules have been written specifically for each type of disaster—Earthquakes, Floods, Hurricanes, Lightning, Tornadoes, Wildland Fires and Fire Prevention and Safety.



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**Note:** As you begin these lessons, you can expect many questions about loss and future possibilities. These will vary with the students' age and their understanding of the permanence of loss. Discussions may bring to light some worries related to the disaster, safety issues and concerns about another occurrence. Listen also for concerns about changes that result from loss, both tangible (things that are lost or have changed) and intangible (feelings, vague emotions or a changed sense of the world that children cannot articulate). Coupling any of these activities with discussion of what remains and what has been found—both tangible and intangible—can help children and teenagers adopt a positive outlook for the future. Following these discussions, sometimes it will be important to take a break and engage in a relaxing activity, like a short recess outside or free time to visit with friends.

### Impact of Disaster

Young people are considered to be at the highest risk for emotional reactions and difficulties after a disaster. The sooner we provide help them with help, the better the outcome can be. The first steps in providing help are (a) to understand how disasters can affect children and teens; (b) to recognize the cycle of disaster; and (c) to identify potential ripple effects after disaster.

Young people respond differently to disasters, depending on their understanding and maturity, but in children or teens of all ages, disasters often create—

- Worry and anxiety, particularly around issues of safety for themselves and others.
- Concern that the disaster will recur.
- Feelings that they are re-experiencing the disaster.
  - Troubling images may come into their minds, even when they are trying hard “not to think about them.”
  - Thoughts and feelings may arise when reminded about the disaster, for example, by storms, sirens, smoke or loud noises.
  - Thoughts may occur without any obvious reason. All these intrusive thoughts can interfere with school performance and their behavior at home.

Many reactions are common after traumatic events. Not every child will display all the symptoms below, but many will show some of these responses. Some may have mild reactions while others' responses are more intense. In general, these will improve with time and every child has his or her own timetable for recovery. This timetable may be similar to those of other family members or classmates, or it may be very different.

**Preschool Children (3 through 6 years old)** – Children in this age group may be more irritable, have more temper tantrums and display other behavior problems. They may be harder to calm down when upset. Sleep and eating problems sometimes appear. Children may have more difficulty separating from parents and caregivers. They also may ask many questions over and over, and they may draw images of the event and play games of “pretend” around the disaster experience. For a brief time, children may regress or slide back-



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ward in their development (for example in toilet training, talking and wanting more help with dressing and personal care). They do not understand the permanence of loss. They also might not understand that the replays they see on television are not the disaster happening again.

**School-Age Children (7 through 11 years old)** – Children in this age group may ask many questions about the disaster and about what will be happening next. As empathy develops, their worry about safety extends beyond family and friends to others who may be experiencing the disaster. Behavior problems are common, including not listening and minding as well as before the disaster, being more active, and having more conflicts with friends and family. Attention and concentration can be problematic; this is made worse by sleep problems which can also occur. Together, these reactions may contribute to a decline in school performance. Children may have physical complaints like stomachaches and headaches, and they might draw, write or play around disaster themes. At this age, children understand the permanence of loss.

**Adolescents (12 through 18 years old)** – Teenagers in this age group may be moodier and more irritable than usual and display behavior problems, like withdrawing from their families and friends. They may have less tolerance for frustration, and although overwhelmed by their emotions, they often affect an air of nonchalance. They may also have more concerns about the outlook for their futures. Teenagers may be more likely to try risky behavior like reckless driving, drinking and drug use. Sleep problems are common, and attention and concentration may be worse, all contributing to a decline in school performance. Teenagers often write about their disaster experiences and feelings, their reactions being very similar to those of adults.

### Factors That May Put Children and Adolescents at Increased Risk

There are several factors that influence the impact of a disaster on children and adolescents. These factors may place young people at higher risk for long-term difficulties.

- **Dose of Exposure.** The dose of exposure is the degree to which a young person was involved in the disaster. The more intense the exposure for the child or adolescent, the greater will be the risk for difficulties. The exposure may take the form of actual injury or a threat to the child's or adolescent's well-being. Death or injury (or perceived threat) to a parent is considered a high dose of exposure; a loss or death of a pet can also be seen as a high dose of exposure. Exposure can also take the form of property loss, such as a destroyed home, loss of belongings or the destruction of the school.

In the age of extensive media coverage of disaster, excessive exposure to the event via the media (television, print, radio or Internet) is associated with more reactions in children. The best strategy is to monitor media exposure and limit it as much as possible.

**Note:** If a child or adolescent has experienced the death of a close family member as a result of disaster, more specialized and intensive



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interventions than those in *Masters of Disaster* may be warranted. A consultation with a specialist who understands child traumatic grief is recommended.

- **Functioning of the Child or Adolescent and Family Before the Disaster.** A child's or adolescent's response to disaster may be affected by prior life events or pre-existing problems. If the young person has experienced another loss or trauma prior to the current disaster, the memories of that loss coupled with the new event may overwhelm his or her ability to cope and function effectively. Other stressors, such as family problems, a recent divorce, a parent's job loss, the birth of a new sibling, domestic violence or a change in schools, may be risk factors. If a child or adolescent was receiving special services (mental health, medical or special education) before the disaster, he or she may be at increased risk for difficulties after the disaster.
- **Coping Skills.** How well a child or adolescent has coped with problems in the past is frequently a good predictor of how well he or she copes after a disaster. Coping methods such as passivity (inaction because of fear or a sense of futility) or simply trying to deny events (pretending that life has not changed, or waiting for the restoration of daily life as it once was) are not effective in handling problems.
- **Parental or Caregiver Distress.** How parents and caregivers are coping after the disaster is perhaps one of the best predictors of how children and adolescents will cope after a disaster. It will be important for parents and caregivers to model appropriate and positive coping skills. Participating in the *Masters of Disasters* activities is one important way parents and caregivers can help their families' disaster recovery.

**Note:** While working with young people, you are likely to see many of these potential risk factors. This could lead to frustration as you work to introduce new learning materials and meet educational guidelines. It is important to remember that disaster leads to trauma reactions, particularly changes in behavior. Extra patience is recommended, and you might have to present new material more than once. To increase the likelihood that work will be completed, consider reduced assignments (working odd-numbered problems rather than all the problems; defining a couple of words each evening, rather than all the words, finishing the chapter by end of the week, and so forth).

Both positive and negative events cause changes in life. Disasters also produce changes, sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent. Wherever the disaster occurred, and however the disaster has affected a community and individuals, the *Masters of Disaster In the Aftermath* activities and discussions are designed to help children and their families.



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