

MANAGING THE STRESS OF CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

If children have been directly exposed to death and destruction following a disaster, parents need to communicate with them through various stages. Immediately, physical safety and security takes priority. However, in the aftermath, it is difficult to predict whether or the kinds of psychological problems they may have. The following management plan may help minimize later difficulties.

- Your response to the disaster will affect your child's response. Therefore, it is helpful to discuss your own reactions with another adult before talking with your children.
- Make time to be available for your child to talk or just spend time together.
- Every child has a different way of responding to trauma. It is not advisable to require the same response of everyone. Listen to your child's stories.
- Discuss the event in an open and honest manner with your children. Children might want to talk intermittently, and younger children might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Be available for your child.
- Engage your child in conversation of their choosing — not necessarily about their feelings or the scene. Talking about the normal events of life is central to health.

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- Maintain daily routines and familiar schedules to the extent possible. Attending school, established family time, and bedtime stories can be reassuring and help children to feel safe and normal.
- Limit the times of exposure to television or other sources on information about the disaster and its victims.
- Increase your child's sense of control and mastery within the household — let him or her plan dinner or the evening's activities.
- Reassure your children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Older children and adolescents may feel stirred up. Helping them understand their behavior and setting limits can help.
- Some children may respond with a return to old behaviors, such as a loss of toilet training, or inability to fall asleep alone. These should be tolerated and understood.
- Help your child modulate the extent to which they personalize or identify with the victims or the situation. Remind your children that they are safe and with you.
- Provide concrete information to your child about how s/he differs from the people in the disaster event to decrease over-identifying with the victims.