

Helping children and teens cope with stressful public events

Stressful public events—such as military action, acts of terrorism, shootings, abductions, airplane crashes, fires, natural or man-made disasters, or disease outbreaks—can be hard for children and teens to cope with and understand.

How your child or teen responds will depend on their age, temperament, developmental level, and how closely an event touches them (that is, whether it affects people they know and love). Don't underestimate the impact of events around the world. Though your child or teen may not understand, they can still feel frightened and wonder whether they are in danger.

Broad media coverage and easy access to social media, with images, videos and stories that are scary and graphic, can make these feelings worse. Without context, seeing these images and hearing this kind of news can lead children and teens to view the world as a confusing and scary place.

After a tragedy, children might worry that it will happen again, that they'll be separated from family, or that someone they know will be hurt or die. This can be traumatizing if a child's parent or close loved one is a first responder like a firefighter, paramedic or police officer, or a health care provider to victims.

Your younger child might show fear or worry by:

- bedwetting,
- thumb sucking,
- wanting to be held or being "clingy,"
- having problems sleeping and eating,
- throwing tantrums,
- being agitated,
- being afraid of the dark, or
- complaining of headaches and stomachaches.

Your teen may pretend not to be concerned. Don't let this fool you. Talk to them and ask about any doubts or fears they may have. Teens can also:

- become moody, less patient, argumentative and sad,
- have trouble with sleeping or changes in appetite,
- experience stomachaches or headaches, or
- want to be alone or with others more than usual.

How you can help

You play an important role in reassuring your child or teen by staying calm and helping them understand and cope with their feelings and reactions.

Take your child's concerns seriously. Respect their thoughts and feelings. Don't tell them their feelings are silly. Your child should know that it's okay to be upset by disturbing events and that their concerns are valid. At the same time, avoid talking about what happened over and over if your child is doing fine.

Reassure your child. Tell them how you ensure your home and community is safe. But don't make promises you can't keep, such as saying there will never be another natural or man-made disaster, or a disease outbreak. You can also reassure your child by pointing out people who are helping to make the situation better.

Check in to see how your child is feeling, but don't force your child to talk until they are ready. Sometimes children just want simple, reassuring answers. Encourage a younger child to draw a picture or tell a story about how they feel. Offer plenty of hugs and cuddles if your child needs them.

Check in to see how your child understands the event, and offer any explanations or discussion at your child's developmental level. Remember that younger children may not understand how close or far an event is when they see and hear graphic details on television or on the Internet. Try to give them a sense of where events are taking place in relation to them.

Talk about how you feel when tragedy happens. Be as calm and honest as you can, using words and concepts your child can understand. Your child will learn from your response and may feel better knowing they're not the only one who is worried.

Maintain family routines. Routines bring things back to normal and limit the amount of time your child might spend thinking about the events. Routine can also help your child sleep better at night and feel like life is predictable.

Spend family time together. Doing things your child enjoys will help them feel more secure and connected.

Limit screen time. News images can be scary and confusing and should not be watched over and over. If you plan to watch the news, do it together and turn off the television when you are done so you can talk about what is going on.

Limit social media. Access to social media exposes everyone to violent stories and disturbing, unedited images and videos from around the world. Even kids or teens not directly affected by a tragedy can become traumatized when repeatedly exposed to horrific images or videos on social media.

Brainstorm as a family about how you might be able to help people affected by the events. Point out the importance of community and rescue workers coming together to help.

Talk about things that are happening in the world. They will learn by listening to you talk to them and with others. Read books and watch videos about serious events that are not dramatized (such a documentary). Help children understand the significance of what has happened in an age-appropriate way. This will help your child or teen learn and gives you a chance to correct any misinformation they may have heard.

Be patient. The stress of world events can also be hard on you, and make it more difficult to be patient with or listen to your children. Remember to look after yourself, too.

Be prepared. Talk about all the ways to exit your home safely in case of fire, and decide on a place to meet if you need to get out quickly. Put together an emergency kit and let everyone know where it is. This can increase your child's confidence and help them feel more in control.

When should you call a doctor?

World events and disasters of all kinds can make it harder to deal with other difficult or traumatic personal situations such as illness or death in the family, divorce, a move to a new town or school. If this is the case, your child may need extra support and attention.

Sometimes following a disaster, a person may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can happen from either seeing or being a part of a very traumatic event. Children and teens can experience PTSD. Talk to your doctor if your child or teen shows major changes in behaviour, such as:

- new behaviour problems at home or school,
- new learning problems,
- continuous angry outbursts or tantrums,
- changes in usual social activity or play with other children,
- frequent nightmares or problems sleeping,
- ongoing physical problems, such as stomach upset, headaches,
- ongoing eating problems; sudden weight gain or loss,
- feeling very anxious or afraid,
- being sad or depressed,
- expressing hopelessness about life or the future,
- increased risk-taking,
- using alcohol, street drugs or illicit prescription medications, or
- talking about suicide, or self-harm.

Asking for help doesn't mean that anyone has failed. Talking to a health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, doctor, social worker or nurse, can be a helpful first step.

Additional resources:

- [Helping Kids Cope with Media Coverage of War and Traumatic Events \(MediaSmarts\)](#)
 - [Talking to Kids about Hate in Media \(MediaSmarts\)](#)
 - [Talking to Children About Tragedies & Other News Events \(American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)
 - [How to Support Your Child's Resilience in a Time of Crisis \(American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)
 - [When tragedy happens: Do you discuss it with your child or not? \(Montreal Children's Hospital, McGill University Health Centre\)](#)
 - [Talking with kids & teens about dying and death \(KidsGrief.ca\)](#)
 - [Post traumatic stress disorder \(Anxiety BC\)](#)
 - [Emergency preparedness \(Government of Canada\)](#)
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Reviewed by the following CPS committees:

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee
- Public Education Advisory Committee

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The information on Caring for Kids should not be used as a substitute for medical care and advice. If you have specific concerns about your child's health, please see your child's paediatrician, family physician, or another health care provider.