

Helping Family Members Cope

Children can have a difficult time coping with trauma. They may be sad or afraid and reenact the disaster over and over to try to make sense of it. Their behavior may regress, and they may have problems such as loss of appetite, stomach aches and nightmares.

To help children birth to age 5:

- ◆ Reassure them and give them physical comfort.
- ◆ Help them get back to their normal routines as soon as possible, including bed time.
- ◆ Encourage them to talk about their losses, such as the death of pets or the loss of toys.
- ◆ Monitor their exposure to news media reports about the disaster.

To help older children:

- ◆ Give them extra attention and consideration. Temporarily relax your expectations of their performance at home and at school.
- ◆ Set gentle but firm rules for acting-out behavior.
- ◆ Give them structured but undemanding home chores and other activities.
- ◆ Encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings and be willing to listen.

Some children suffer from long-term problems such as depression, prolonged grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms include persistent sadness, irritability, loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, loss of

energy, sleeping problems, and even physical problems. If a child is having difficulty recovering from the trauma of a disaster, seek the help of a qualified mental health professional. Be alert to your child's behavior and feelings so you will know to seek help if necessary.

Adults also suffer various degrees of stress after a disaster. Some symptoms of stress are erratic behavior, anger, rapid mood swings, increased substance abuse, physical ailments (headaches, fatigue), flashbacks, strained relationships, difficulty concentrating, and sleeping problems. These are usually normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

To help relieve stress:

- ◆ Take care of yourself by eating healthful foods and getting plenty of rest.
- ◆ Seek support from people you trust and spend time with family and friends.
- ◆ Maintain your normal routine as much as possible.
- ◆ Get physical exercise.
- ◆ Seek trusted sources of information.
- ◆ Avoid using drugs and alcohol.
- ◆ Participate in community recovery events to help others.
- ◆ Be understanding of yourself and others.
- ◆ Seek extra help from a clergy member, mental health professional, community mental health center, or your doctor.

