

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THE EFFECTS FOLLOWING A STRESSFUL EVENT

In the event of an unexpected event where we as humans feel powerless and unprepared our responses can be intense and varied. The event can be a onetime event such as an accident, a natural disaster or violent attack, or it can be an ongoing threat to life or safety.

Sometimes the responses can appear immediately after the event, or a few hours or a few days later. Any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can cause responses even if it doesn't involve direct physical harm.

These responses are part of an automatic system that all animals and humans share. It is known as the fight, flight or freeze response. Adults can experience this and children can also have similar responses but cannot, as easily, rationalise that they will be okay, or have the resources to feel safe.

The way children see and understand their parent's response is very important. Children are aware of their parent's worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive after a major event. A child's response also depends on their age, how directly connected they are to the event, and the support that they get from the adults in their lives.

SYMPTOMS AND RESPONSES TO AN UNEXPECTED EVENT

Following an unexpected event most people experience a wide range of physical and emotional reactions. Some general reactions common to children (these can vary depending on age) are –

- ✓ Fearfulness, clinginess
- ✓ Fretful, tearful
- ✓ Irritable or more stubborn (more tantrums and playing up)
- ✓ Withdrawing or showing lack of response
- ✓ Changes in eating or sleeping habits (such as trouble getting to sleep, sleeping more than usual, or sleep disturbances such as nightmares or waking during the night)
- ✓ Easily distracted, forgetful
- ✓ Physical complaints (such as stomach ache, body aches, headaches, feeling sick)
- ✓ Temporary regression in toileting, speech or self confidence
- ✓ Difficulty expressing emotions, or conflict of emotions
- ✓ Increased fears about others safety

You can expect these symptoms and responses to last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as the event is processed.

WHAT CHILDREN MIGHT NEED

Debrief children after a crisis to let them tell their story and to reveal any wrong assumptions, fears, or personal blaming they may be experiencing. After listening supportively, adults can help reframe the crisis for children without implying judgment.

Help children learn to use words that express their feelings, such as sad, scared, angry, or happy. Remember you as a teacher or parent have also been affected by this event so be sure the words fit the children's feelings and not yours. Let them know about what are normal reactions following these events.

Assert children that you are doing everything you can to keep them safe. Ask them what they need to feel safe; and if it is feasible; put their requests in action.

Re-establish a sense of order and routine. One way may be to try to keep to the daily structure as much as possible. A regular schedule helps recreate a sense of security for children. Re-exposure via television (or visiting earthquake hotspots) should be limited particularly when children remain anxious and clingy.

Plan and carry out activities that will calm the children. Encourage young children to use art (drawing, painting, clay modeling, and collage) to express their emotions. Older children can be offered opportunities to draw, write poems, or journal their feelings. Display the children's work, or have them describe or read it to others.

Reassure children that the event is being dealt with appropriately—people getting medical attention, police responding to the criminals, buildings being cleaned up or repaired, and support being offered to those affected by the trauma.

Organise playtime to allow children to be children in order to overcome the emphasis the trauma has had on their lives. After a crisis, just the freedom to play and be children is important. Children need a sense of resolution however. Trauma related play is an important part of the process, however repetition of traumatic themes without resolution can be re-traumatising. It is best to guide the children to a resolution that shows safety and security. Initial mastery may include encouraging parents to draw into the child's picture examples of emergency services coming to help and everyone being safe and the family all being together and being safe.

Read stories about crisis situations and how people helped those involved. Stories that illustrate how other people cared for them after the disaster are especially effective.

Help children get involved in caring for those affected by the crisis through writing letters, sending pictures, baking food, or otherwise helping in a way that fits with their abilities. Actively doing something to help others refocuses children's thoughts or emotions in healthy ways without minimizing them. Think together with the children about ways to contribute to the needs of others.

Parents and teachers should consider an increase in transition time between activities. For example, lengthening story telling or cuddling at bedtime may be necessary the first few nights after a trauma. In the classroom, teachers can help student's transition by allowing extra time to prepare students for a field trip or for taking a test since trauma decreases one's ability to think clearly and effectively.

Secondary reactions may emerge, such as fear of riding on a plane, going by the location where the trauma occurred, or leaving parents. Anticipate these and prepare for them, as well as be observant of your children's reactions in various situations after the trauma. This will help you continue to help your children process the trauma's effects.

USEFUL THINGS TO SAY TO REDUCE CHILDREN'S ADRENALINE RESPONSE

'Earthquakes especially major ones like we had are very rare'.

'The aftershocks that we are experiencing are normal after a major earthquake and are just the ground re-settling, it does not mean that we will have another major earthquake'. Even if we did have a shake, it would not be the same as an earthquake and everyone is ready to keep you and us safe."

'It is very rare to have another major earthquake once we have already had one, it is usual however to have after shocks. While aftershocks are scary, they are reducing in intensity and how often they come.'

SOME COMMON TIPS TO HELP CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE HAVING TROUBLE SLEEPING

- ✓ Keep bed time as consistent as possible
- ✓ Have a set 'winding down' period before required bedtime where you prepare your child (bath, warm drink, story time)
- ✓ Help your child to refrain from exercise at least 4 hours before bedtime
- ✓ Try and use only the recognised place for sleeping (ie: bedroom instead of another place that isn't a part of their routine)
- ✓ Make sure your child's bed and bedroom are as quiet and comfortable as can be
- ✓ Reassure children that they are loved and supported

HELPFUL TIPS FOR CALMING CHILDREN THAT PARENTS CAN HELP THEM WITH

Tummy Breathing

1. Helping your body learn to relax is a good way to help yourself feel better.
2. Lie on the floor or bed and place a small soft toy on your tummy.
3. Breathe deeply in and out making the soft toy on your tummy rise during inhaling.
4. Slowly count backwards from 5 while breathing through your nose and then slowly breathe out through your mouth while again counting backwards from 5.
5. As you are slowly breathing in and out make sure that the soft toy on your tummy rises each time you breathe in and out.
6. Complete this 4 times before you go to sleep.

Worry Stones/Messages

You need 5 small round stones, a small paper bag and a pen.

1. At night, before bedtime, you take a stone from the bag and tell your worry or feelings to it - one worry per stone. Or alternatively write the worry on a piece of paper.
2. Place the stones under your pillow so that you do not need to think about them while you are sleeping.
4. In the morning your worries are gone.
5. If needed repeat the next night before bed.

Bubbles

You need Bubbles and Bubble Wand.

1. At night before bedtime blow as hard as you can through the Bubble Wand.
2. Repeat several times until you feel calm.

Draw a Different Ending

You will need paper and felt pens.

1. At night draw a picture about what you are worried about.
2. Scrunch up the page.
3. Draw the picture again with a different ending.

Eg: imagine your favourite superhero fighting off scary monsters.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES THAT CAN BE PURCHASED THROUGH

www.skylight.org.nz ARE:

"A Terrible Thing Happened" for children aged 4-8 years

"Something has Happened" for children aged 3-6 years

"When Tough Stuff Happens" for children aged 7-12 years

"The Journey Through – Ideas for Getting Through Tough Times – for teenagers