



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

HELPING STUDENTS AFTER A DISASTER

The death and destruction that accompany disaster events warrant special attention to communicating with children and adolescents. It is difficult to predict the kinds of psychological problems that children and adolescents will have; however, the following steps may help minimize later difficulties:

- Engage your students in conversations of their choosing — not necessarily about their feelings or the scene. Talking about the normal events of life is central to health.
- Remind students they are safe. Issues of physical safety and security take priority.
- Explain to children that these are actually rare and unlikely events. Tell them that there are warning systems in place.
- Everyone has a different way of responding to trauma.
- Allow children to respond their own way and listen to their stories.
- Maintain daily routines to the extent possible; avoid starting new ones. Stability can be reassuring.
- Your response to the disaster will affect your children's response. Discuss your own reactions with other adults before talking with your children.
- Be alert to children expressing overwhelming feelings in discussions. Limiting time spent talking about the event can help your children express what they wish and not more than they might wish they had.
- Older children and adolescents may feel "stirred up". Helping them understand their behavior and setting limits can help.
- Some children may respond by being distracted or having trouble remembering things. These should be tolerated and understood.
- Be alert to changes in students' usual behavior (e.g., drop in grades, loss of interest, not doing homework, increased sleepiness or distraction, isolating themselves, weight loss or gain).
- Increase your students' sense of control and mastery.
- Encourage students to be active participants in disaster and emergency planning.

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For Younger Children:

- Discuss the event in an open honest manner with kids. Children might want to talk intermittently; younger kids might need concrete information to be repeated.
- Limit exposure to television and other sources of information about the disaster and its victims.
- Filter the information students receive by restricting or limiting their access to traditional and social media.
- Excessive information about victims increases distress through personalizing or over identification; reduce this by providing concrete information about how they differ from the people involved in the disaster.
- Reassure younger children that they are safe and that their family and other adults will take care of them.
- Fearful younger children may need to touch base from time to time throughout the day during the early stages following a crisis.
- Acknowledge questions about the death and the destruction.
- Acknowledge your student's feelings: "You sound sad/angry/worried..." "Are you sad/ angry/ worried?"
- Remind them that their feelings are okay.
- Acknowledge that you, too, may feel sad, angry, or worried.

For Older Students:

- Acknowledge the importance of peers in helping to reestablish normalcy.
- For many teens, their cognitive abilities are often greater than their emotional capacity to manage highly stressful situations. Expect emotional swings.
- Remember the importance of providing emotional support by "naming" the expectable reactions of sadness, numbness, anger, fear, and confusion. Explain how seemingly inappropriate giddiness, laughter, or callousness often are used to help ourselves from becoming overwhelmed.

