

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 if/how children will be affected psychologically. The following management plan may help minimize later difficulties.

- Discuss your own reactions with another adult before talking with your children. Your response to the disaster will affect your child's response.
- 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 bedtimes 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.
- Help older children and adolescents understand their behavior and set limits for them. They too may feel stirred up.
- Tolerate and understand any return to old behaviors your children may exhibit. These may include a loss of toilet training or the inability to fall asleep alone.
- 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 they differ from the people in the disaster event to decrease over-identifying with the victims.