

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

While children, like adults, are inherently resilient, they will generally be emotionally impacted by tragic events such as the death of a family member, street shootings, natural disasters, or other traumatic incidents. Regardless of their age or how they interpret these events, children may experience strong emotions such as anxiety, vulnerability, confusion, fear, or loss of control.

Parents, guardians, and other adults within the family can play an important role in helping children feel safe and secure during difficult events by demonstrating calm and by conveying reassurance.

While the range of emotional responses that children may exhibit is varied, there are some common key reactions that most children will feel to a greater or lesser degree:

Anxiety and/or Fear

When exposed to a traumatic event, children may experience anxiety and fear. They may develop a fear of the world as a frightening and dangerous place or may worry about their own safety or the safety of their family. These deep emotional responses may get intensified by extensive media coverage and an excessive focus on the traumatic events by friends, family, and the community.

Confusion

Children may be confused about the difference between tragic events affecting others and a real threat to themselves and their families. Younger children may have difficulty differentiating between violent incidents seen on the news, compared to real events that affect them directly. What parents can do to help is explaining to children the difference between reality and imagined fears, while controlling their own reactions because children's reactions are easily influenced by how their parents respond to an event.

Loss of Control/Helplessness

Witnessing a tragic event makes children wonder why their parents do not have super-powers to control the tragedy, to prevent it or to anticipate it. It is very difficult for children to experience their own reaction when they are always protected by adults. Their thoughts and behaviour patterns can be affected. Some children may react by becoming more aggressive, less cooperative, or more defiant in their interaction with adults and other children.

Vulnerability/Loss of Stability

Unexpected tragic events can be very unsettling and traumatic both for children and adults. However, children and adolescents' emotional response may be more intense especially if they have recently gone through a difficult time within their own family, such as a divorce or separation or the death of a family member.

Best Ways to Help Children Cope

- 🌿 Acknowledge children's feelings by reinforcing that what and how they are feeling about the tragic event is a normal reaction, likely similar to how other children are feeling.
- 🌿 Give them time to adjust by anticipating that this is a difficult time in their lives.
- 🌿 Comfort children and reassure them that they are safe (e.g. *"I want you to understand that there are thousands of people out there whose job is to keep us safe"*).
- 🌿 Offer reassurance as much as possible.
- 🌿 Help children distinguish between reality and their imagination.
- 🌿 Do not minimize their feelings and help children express how they feel about the situation.
- 🌿 Involve them in helping others (e.g. supporting the victims or the rescue workers, assisting with community tributes).
- 🌿 Be honest about your own emotions; however, avoid sharing your anxieties and fears.
- 🌿 Engage them in healthy behaviours to enhance their ability to cope with stress.
- 🌿 Help children use creative outlets like art and music to express their feelings.
- 🌿 Try to limit exposure to media coverage of current events, as repeated exposure to visual images of the tragedy may create more anxiety and fear.
- 🌿 Monitor their use of social media as they can be easily influenced by their peers.
- 🌿 Maintain the family's daily routine to the greatest extent possible.
- 🌿 Try not to overreact as the extra attention may reinforce your child's reaction to the event.
- 🌿 Remind children of times in the past when they were afraid and how they coped with it.

Listen, listen, listen!

There is nothing more empowering and comforting for children than having parents that listen, convey understanding, and provide them with a warm hug when needed.

If your child is exhibiting acute symptoms of prolonged reactions, anxiety, sleep difficulties, unusual behaviour, this may require the professional support of an experienced counsellor. You can seek professional guidance from your EFAP provider or mental health professionals providing specialized community-based services.

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)

Seeking the support and guidance of a professional EFAP counsellor can help you and your child cope better with traumatic events.

Homewood Human Solutions' EFAP is a free, totally confidential service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

You can reach us anytime by calling our Client Services (Intake) Centers at 1.800.663.1142.

For more information on the additional support offered by Homewood Human Solutions, please visit us at www.homewoodhumansolutions.com or visit our Healthy Workplaces Blog located at www.healthyworkplacesinfo.com