



Indicators of distress in children following disasters - when to refer to specialist mental health services

Children and adolescents cope with traumatic events such as disasters in many different ways, and responses vary from person to person. Children are not always able to express their feelings in the same way that adults do, and may not show the same reactions as adults. While children are generally quite resilient with support of family and friends, it is important to be aware of and respond to changes in children's behaviour and functioning.

There are several things that practitioners and professionals can do to help children, adolescents and their families to seek specialist mental health support.

Why are children at risk for mental health issues after a disaster?

Emotional stress from a disaster can be difficult for children because they:

- Understand less about the situation;
- Feel less able to control events;
- Have less experience dealing with stressful situations; and
- May not be able to communicate their feelings, such as fear or anxiety.

In addition, children who have previously experienced trauma or have a pre-existing mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder can be particularly vulnerable. For example, children with autism, as well as infants and toddlers, may have difficulty communicating their thoughts and feelings. Parents and caregivers should also be supported to take steps to help their children cope with traumatic events.

Impacts of disasters on children

Pre-school children

- Tantrums and tears
- Hyperactivity
- Oppositional behaviour
- Repetitive play re-enactment
- Regression or loss of previously acquired skills
- Increased reports of physical symptoms: sore tummies, aches and pains
- New fears not necessarily connected with the trauma

Primary school children and adolescents

- New awareness of own mortality
- Increased risk taking
- Impaired academic performance
- Conflict with family and peers
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Overdeveloped sense of responsibility



Children and adolescents can experience a range of problems after a disaster. In a minority of cases, they can go on to develop mental health problems such as depression, anxiety or Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Practitioners and health professionals should be alert to reports of changes to parent-child dynamics, school performance, interest in activities, concentration, sleep or weight.

If several of these impacts of disasters on children are being reported, and the child continues to be very upset (anxious, fearful, sad, angry) for more than 2 to 4 weeks after the disaster, health professionals should consider referring the child or family to a specialist mental health service. It is important to remember to assess the child directly. Parents may minimize or not recognize children's signs of distress.

Treatments

There are effective treatments for children and adolescents who have been through a traumatic event such as a disaster. The recommended approach is a type of counselling known as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which involves; learning about common reactions to traumatic events, teaching children strategies to manage anxiety, helping children to get back into everyday activities, and supporting families

Supporting parents

Encourage parents to seek professional mental health support. Remember to discuss with parents their own level of coping. After a disaster, parents/carers will be in a better position to help their child if they are taking good care of themselves. Therefore, parents who discuss their own disaster reactions with another adult, such as a trusted friend, family member, or GP may find it easier to talk with their child about the disaster experience and their reactions.

Listening is an important part of providing emotional and practical support. Be sympathetic and understanding of the family's situation and what they've been through.

If a parent is visibly distressed:

- Acknowledge their distress by saying something like "I can see that this is upsetting for you", give them a moment and let them know you're willing to listen
- Acknowledge that they have taken an important step in seeking out your advice and support
- Reassure parents that there are effective treatments for children, adolescents and families who experience difficulties after a disaster.

For more information

For more information visit the Disaster Mental Health Hub at phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub

Additional Services

**For immediate assistance call
Lifeline on 13 11 14**

**Australian
Psychological Society**
Find a psychologist
service: 1800 333 497

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636