

DISASTER

Practitioner Tips



Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

Helping children and adolescents after a disaster and when to seek specialist mental health support

Children and adolescents cope with traumatic events such as disasters in many different ways, and responses can 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 and difficult feelings may resolve with the support of family and friends, it is important to be aware of and respond to changes in children's behaviour.

Health practitioners and other professionals that come into contact with families who have been significantly affected by disasters may hear about experiences of mental health difficulties, or they may notice significant changes in 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.

Risk factors and signs to look out for

Risk factors for children and adolescents

Some children and adolescents may be at a higher risk of developing a mental illness after a disaster, compared to other children.

The factors that can increase risk include pre-existing psychological issues, the level of perceived threat of the event, poor family functioning, low social support, and parent mental health difficulties or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis.

A sense of safety, predictability and social support is paramount to a child's recovery following a disaster.

Mental health problems that can develop and signs to look out for

Children and adolescents can experience a range of problems after a natural disaster. In a minority of cases, they can go on to develop mental health problems such as depression, anxiety or PTSD.

Practitioners and professionals should be alert to reports of changes to parent-child dynamics, school performance, interest in activities, concentration, sleep or weight.

Other signs or symptoms to look out for are any increase in mood-swings, 'acting out' behaviours or isolating themselves. If these have been occurring for more than two weeks, or the child is very distressed, practitioners should encourage parents to see their GP. A GP can provide advice, support or arrange referrals to specialist services if needed.



Services and treatments

Specialist mental health services

Practitioners and professionals should encourage parents to see their GP if they are concerned about their child's mental health. GPs can determine the most appropriate course of action and refer onward to a specialist service or practitioner if required.

Treatment begins with a thorough assessment of the child's behaviour and emotions. This will involve speaking to the parents and the child, and perhaps other family members as well as the child's teachers.

The clinician will also want to know how other family members are coping. After an assessment has been made, the clinician can develop a treatment plan to assist the child and family.

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 the event and common reactions to traumatic events
- teaching children to relax and manage anxiety
- helping children to get back into everyday activities
- supporting families.

Supporting parents

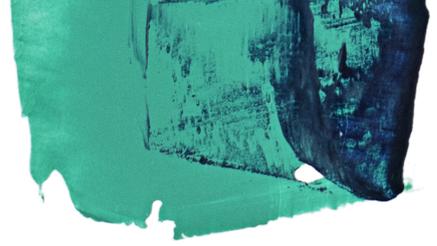
Encouraging parents to seek professional mental health support

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 natural disaster.



If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

Useful services and resources

Lifeline - for immediate assistance
13 11 14

Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist
1800 333 497

Beyond Blue
1300 224 636