

Guide to

# DISASTER RECOVERY

Parents & Caregivers





## Introduction

**Emergencies and disasters can impact individual, family and community well-being and resilience. These types of events can complicate access to support structures and services. Separation from family members can occur, with hours or days passing before being reunited.**

Neighbourhoods and communities may be called on to evacuate on short notice, forcing people to make important decisions in minutes—whether to evacuate, where to go, when to leave, and what to bring with them (including pets). People may live in shelters for days, not knowing if their homes and businesses have been saved or lost. Routine is disrupted and one's sense of security is undermined. Families and communities should not underestimate the accumulative effects of evacuation, displacement, relocation, and rebuilding.

In the aftermath, as the scope of the damage is known, families may learn of injuries to loved ones. The loss of homes, pets, livestock, and valuables, including cultural and sentimental items, will increase feelings of sadness and vulnerability. If a disaster, such as a fire, is found to have been set intentionally, people grapple with increased anger and blame.

Like other traumatic events, disasters will be particularly difficult for individuals with special needs.

Post-disaster problems with housing, food, water, electricity, transportation, work, school, childcare, cultural activities, and daily routines can disrupt living for weeks or months. People suffer financial hardships when their homes, businesses, or jobs are lost.

Confusion can mount as they seek disaster assistance from local and federal agencies or their insurance companies. People are constantly dealing with the unknown. As a result, signs of stress may become evident even months after the disaster.

Children's reactions to disasters and their aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, grandparents, families, teachers, and other caregivers cope during and after the events. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. Below are common reactions parents may see in their children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing that these reactions are likely may help you be prepared to support your child.

## Common Reactions to Expect

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets, livestock and wildlife):
  - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members
  - Young children may become more clingy to parents, grandparents, siblings, or teachers
- Fears of disasters or new ones starting
- Distress and anxiety with reminders of the disaster
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increased activity level
  - Decreased concentration and attention
  - Increased irritability
  - Withdrawal
  - Angry outbursts
  - Aggression
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, aches and pains)
- Prolonged focus on the disaster (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Changes in sleep patterns and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Changes in school performance
- Regressive behaviours in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviorus in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviours)

## Some words of encouragement and advice

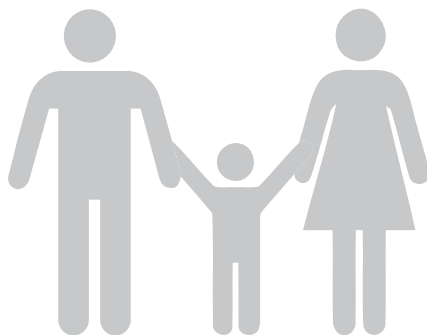
**Remember no one knows your child as well as you do;** family is the most important support network for children.

**There is no right or wrong.** Everyone reacts differently and recovers in their own unique way.

**Spend time talking with your children.** This will let them know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Because during and after disaster includes constantly changing situations, children may have questions on more than one occasion. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. (reassurance that they are safe and that you will answer their questions once you have arrived safely).

**Try to answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed.** For younger children, try to follow disaster conversations with a favourite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

**You might also visit a doctor or other health professional** if you are concerned about someone in your care; don't wait to seek help.



## Things I Can Do for Myself

**Take care of yourself.** Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, getting exercise, and receiving proper medical care.

**Listen to each other.** Parents and other caregivers need to provide support for each other during this time.

**Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful post-disaster period.

**Give yourself a break.** Try not to overdo clean-up activities. These activities may include lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time. Using moderation when doing such work can reduce injury.

**Remember that you too have gone through a traumatic situation.** Give yourself time to think, grieve and plan.

## Things To Be Aware Of With Young Children (1-6 years old)

**Young children are not as verbal as older children. They express themselves through self-talk, play, songs, drawings and conversations with adults and each other. Take time to listen to and observe them. These activities are a window into their thoughts and feelings. Here are some other ways they can show you how they feel:**

- Crying
- Whining
- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Wanting to be held
- Clinging to caregivers
- Stomach aches
- Headaches
- Isolating themselves from others
- Staring into space/no emotion
- Eating problems
- Nightmares
- Sleeping problems
- Crankiness
- Tantrums
- Being stubborn
- Fear of the dark
- Being agitated



# How You Can Help Young Children (1-6 years)

- **Do not be alarmed.** These reactions are some of the ways children express their feelings after a traumatic event or comfort themselves when they are upset. They are important and common signs. They tell you that the child needs help.
- **Do not overreact.** If you punish or nag the child, his/her behaviours may last longer and she/he will not get the help they need.
- **Spend extra time paying attention to the child.** Help them feel understood and loved. Let your children know that you are not upset with their bed wetting, thumb sucking or nail biting. Reassure them that you know that it is only happening because they are upset and remind them over and over again that they are safe.
- **Catch them being good.** Praise for good behaviour brings positive results.
- **Children who cling need to be reassured.** Leave them when you must, but reassure them that you will be back.
- **Comfort and hold them.** Children need physical closeness, holding, comforting, and reassurance. This helps them feel safe and secure.
- **Protect children from further anxiety and fears.** Very young children need to be protected from frightening scenes on TV



because they are not old enough to understand the events. Be there to explain any fearful situations they may encounter.

- **Spend more family time together.** Children need their parents, family members or familiar adults around them during and after a stressful or traumatic event. If family members are not available, time and reassurance from other adults is very important.
- **Maintain familiar routines.** Mealtimes, visits with family and playmates and regular bedtime hours are comforting for the child. Familiar routines reinforce the child's sense of security.
- **Create an environment in which children feel safe enough to ask questions.** Young children do not need detailed information about the events but they need to talk about their feelings. Let children know that they can ask questions. Ask them what they have seen, what they have heard and

how they feel about it. Answer their questions honestly, but make sure the information is suitable to their age level.

Remember also that they are listening when you talk to others about the events. Reassure them that people are doing everything they can to make them safe.

- **Kids have short attention spans.** Talk to them for short periods of time, but do it often. Check in with them to see how they are doing.
- **Tell children how you feel.** Let them know it is okay to have feelings of fear, sadness or anger, and that there are healthy ways of expressing and coping with these feelings. This helps them feel less alone, and more free to talk about their own feelings. They are more secure knowing you can handle what is happening.

# Things To Be Aware Of With Older Children (7-11 years)

**Older children may also show signs of being upset after a stressful event. At this age, the fears and anxieties expressed show that the child is aware of possible danger to themselves, their family and friends. Real or imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the events may also appear. Here are some common reactions they may have:**

- Afraid of being injured or separated from parents, family members or others
- Fear that similar events may occur
- Fear of noises or of the dark
- Rivalries and quarrels among brothers, sisters or friends
- Headaches
- Sleeping problems such as nightmares
- Eating problems and stomach aches
- Anger and irritability
- Nervousness
- Crying
- Withdrawal
- A return to earlier behaviours such as bed wetting, thumb sucking, and clinging

# How You Can Help Older Children (7-11 years)

- **Take children's fears seriously.** Do not force a child to be brave. Respect their feelings and try to understand them.
- **A child who is scared is really scared.** Do not show anger or ridicule. Avoid saying something like: "It's silly to be scared".
- **Telling children that it's OK to be scared is comforting to them.** Reassure them they are safe.
- **Listen to children and ask them what they have to say about their fears, their feelings, their thoughts on what has happened.** Check in with them regularly. This will help them to better understand the situation and deal with their emotions. They will be able to express fears that may be unfounded, giving you the opportunity to explore their fears and reassure them. If possible, include the whole family in the discussion.
- **Try to explain the events as well as you can.** Children, like adults, are more frightened when they do not understand what is happening around them. Adults must do their best to keep the children informed about what has happened and what may happen. Acknowledge what's frightening about it. If you don't know the answers to their questions, it's OK to say that there are some things about the situation that you don't know or understand.
- **Reassurance.** Children usually need reassurance about their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones. They need to know that people are doing all they can to make our country and our world safe.
- **Parents, family members and adults as role models.** It is important to let kids know what you think and feel. It helps them feel less alone if they know that their feelings are similar to yours. It is important, however, not to overwhelm them. If you are too upset, share your reactions with another adult.

# Things To Be Aware Of With Teenagers

Adolescents may be strongly affected by natural disasters. Even indirect exposure through media coverage and social media may challenge their coping skills. Teens are generally more aware of and interested in world events than younger children. They are also able to imagine frightening events in more detail, and may become very interested in or upset by images of destruction.

Teens are already dealing with the many physical, social and emotional changes of adolescence. As they struggle to develop their own identity and values, they typically question and “try on” attitudes that range from cynicism to idealism.

Emergencies can undermine their belief that the world is a safe place, their sense that adults and institutions can be relied upon, and even their confidence that life is meaningful and that there is hope for a better community and society.

It is normal for teens to have feelings of worry, confusion, sadness, anger or fear when disasters happen and are the main focus of the news.

Teenagers often behave as if they are invulnerable. They may pretend not to be affected or concerned in an effort to remain “above it all” and “cool.” Don’t let this fool you. They may be scared, confused, worried and in need of your help. They need the adults in their lives to pay attention to their feelings and reactions.



# How To Help Teenagers

**Here are some suggestions on how to help them cope:**

- **Grief and Loss.** Grief includes shock, denial, anger, numbness, sadness, and confusion. Grief is a normal response to loss of all kinds including death and disasters. Teens need to know that grief is not permanent, and that people deal with it in healthy ways. We may be changed by these events, but we learn that we are strong, we can cope and we will be OK.
- Talk with your teens about grief and loss. This will help them to understand and accept their own thoughts and feelings and to know that grief will end and they will be OK.
- Explain that it can take time to get over a loss.
- Encourage them to be patient with themselves and with others.
- **Honest Reassurance.** Offer reassurance based on the real steps that are being taken to address the situation, not on wishful thinking.
- **Listen to what they have to say about the events and how they perceive them.** Listen patiently. Provide them, as best you can, with factual information and help them distinguish opinion from fact. Try not to lecture or interrupt them.
- **Humour.** Especially among their peers, teens may crack jokes about tragedies in “an unconscious effort to distance themselves from their fears” and from the emotional shock of disaster. This is a normal reaction. Discourage disrespectful jokes while not cutting off lines of communication. There will be less of a problem if teens have the chance to discuss their thoughts and feelings with you in an atmosphere of respect.
- **Deal with Anger.** Know that some teens express their fears through anger. Deal with this calmly and together set appropriate boundaries around it.
- **Affection.** Be patient with teens and with yourself. Give your family time to cope. Find simple, daily ways to show teens that you love them.
- **Comforting friends.** If teens have friends who have been directly affected by a tragedy, help them find ways of comforting these friends. They may need some guidance in knowing how to offer comfort and support. They may avoid

talking to these friends out of fear of causing more pain. On the other hand, they may identify too closely with their friends' pain and spend too much time with them. Balance and keeping up with normal routines is essential.

- **Media Coverage.** You may want to help teens limit their exposure to news coverage of stressful events. Teens should not be shielded from the facts about catastrophic events but watching too much coverage of these events can put them in an emotionally overloaded, anxious state. Watch news coverage together and talk about what you are seeing, hearing, and feeling.
- **Maintain Family Routines.** Maintain family routines, particularly around sleeping, eating and extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, faith services, cultural activities, music, and dance). This does not mean pretending nothing has happened. Make time in your schedule to talk about the situation and plan how to respond positively. Maintaining routines are an important way of ensuring that basic needs are met.
- **Decision making.** If teens are quite upset by these events, it may not be a good time for them to make important decisions. Encourage them to

take the time they need to think things over and be involved with the decisions that they can influence.

- **Appropriate adult behaviour and responses.** Tell teens how you think and feel about the events so that they can understand them better. They will gain confidence to deal with their own feelings if you show them that you have strong feelings and that you can cope with them in healthy ways. Talk to teens' friends about their responses to the situation. This can help them.
- **Vulnerable Teens.** Stressful events and an ongoing climate of uncertainty and worry can have a greater impact on teens that are vulnerable. This may include teens who have experienced serious bullying, difficult family separations, deaths in the family, family violence, sexual assault, a traumatic refugee experience, clinical depression, an anxiety disorder or other mental illness, a history of drug/alcohol abuse, self-injury or suicide attempts. Some vulnerable teens may experience a return or worsening of mental health problems or unhealthy behaviours, up to and including suicide attempts. Seek help when you feel your teen is vulnerable.

# When To Seek Help

Children and youth are amazingly flexible and resilient, and parents and caregivers are capable of helping their children overcome their fears and feelings of anxiety about stressful events.

However, getting additional help is a good idea if a child continues to show significant changes in his or her behaviour, for example:

- Unusual and inappropriate behaviour at home, at school or in the community
- Increased learning problems and difficulty paying attention
- Frequent angry outbursts
- Not taking part in usual social activities or play with other children
- Staring blankly for long periods of time
- Frequent nightmares or other sleep problems
- Physical problems such as nausea, headaches
- Changes in appetite, weight gain or loss

- Feeling overly anxious or afraid
- Feeling sad or depressed
- Recurring talk about death that is more detailed or goes on for longer than is true for other children her/his age under the circumstances
- Self harm behaviours such as cutting, drug/alcohol misuse, risk taking behaviours, and drastic behavioural changes.

One stressful event can make another more difficult to deal with. Children who have experienced the death of someone close or a pet, a divorce or a recent move may have more difficulty coping. This is true for adults as well.

Following a seriously stressful event, some adults and children have found it helpful to talk with a health professional such as a psychologist, a social worker, physician, nurse or psychiatrist who can help them understand and deal with how they are feeling. These feelings are normal reactions to an abnormal event.



# Important Resources

**Canadian Red Cross**

1-800-418-1111

**Public Health Agency Canada**

1-844-280-5020

**Public Safety Canada**

1-800-622-6232

**Kids Help Phone**

Hotline 24 hours: 1-800-668-6868

**BroTalk –  
A support zone for teen guys**

Hotline 24 hours: 1-866-393-5933

**Caring for Kids: Information for  
parents from Canada's paediatricians  
(Canadian Paediatric Society)****Canadian Association for  
Suicide Prevention****Canadian Mental Health Association****Canadian Psychological Association**

1-888-472-0657

**The National Child Traumatic  
Stress Network****Salvation Army Community  
& Family Centres**

1-800-725-2769

**YMCA Canada**



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### Ontario

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