

Children and Storm Stress-

Helping kids deal with the distress of natural disasters

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Monster storms like Hurricanes, Tsunamis, Earthquakes, Tornadoes, Floods, Blizzards, Forest Fires and Mud Slides destroy more than communities- they destroy emotional security and psychological stability in the lives of everyone impacted by these crisis incidents, especially children. Equipping parents and caregivers with rapid response techniques is essential so they can make a positive difference during the rebuilding process. Here are some key elements to know in serving children who have been emotionally traumatized or scared by the negative psychological impact that comes from natural disasters.

How are children affected?

It depends on the age of the child. The younger the child, the more they look to their parents for emotional security and strength. If a parent is "shell-shocked" or psychologically "numb" and not able to manage their own emotions or responsibilities; the child feels even more pressure and becomes more confused and stressed. Remember, it's normal to be overwhelmed by a major natural disaster, which is why it's so important for caregivers to take care of themselves in order to effectively take care of children through the weeks or months of recovery and rebuilding after a major storm.

Focus on the needs of Younger children by noticing what they are saying, drawing or doing to determine if they are feeling stressed from the storm. *(Very small children may display developmentally inappropriate or delayed behavior which may require medical or psychiatric intervention).*

School age kids need to talk, draw or take positive action, *(like kids who didn't lose their homes hosting a lemonade stand to raise money for kids just like them who lost everything during the disaster).* If you give them something to do to help, they can take positive action and sort through their emotions faster.

High school age kids may try to act "cool" or unaffected, yet are often more scared about the changes and losses than any other group. This is because they may understand the financial impact of how losing a home or family business will impact their lives. They may need to experience a bit more "reality" at times to open up their ability to talk about what is happening around them. If the situation is stable enough, older teens can help with neighborhood clean up, which connects them to others in the important task of rebuilding after the storm. Another approach is to see if they are willing to talk with peers, siblings or family members, to build confidence in expressing their stressful emotions to others.

Other Warning Signs

Be alert for dramatic changes in behavior, such as a 'happy-go-lucky' child

before the storm who now continually watches world disasters on the news. Focus on any dramatic shifts in personality. Watch for major changes in sleep, dietary or appetite patterns, school performance, peer relations and so on. If you see major changes, seek professional assessment with a pediatrician, child behavioral specialist, counselor or psychologist. (See a full list of emotional warning signs at www.StormStress.com under resources and articles).

What are some ways to help kids talk about storm stress?

Reach out to children on whichever level they will most likely connect. Talking, writing, drawing, even making up a song or puppet show about the negative impact of the disaster can soften someone's emotional pain by creating opportunities to talk about their experience. Sharing your story helps, regardless of age. Some families will use newspaper clippings about the disaster as a discussion starter, since talking about any crisis event can help kids gain confidence to move from the panic of survival to move toward building greater confidence and strength after the storm.

Are there "hidden media dangers" that make storm stress worse?

Media overexposure can be really dangerous to kids, so avoid this by limiting continual viewing of TV news about the disaster. Children or adults have experienced media overexposure when they show a depressed mood; or by going "numb" to normal emotions associated with stressful events, (*for instance feeling no compassion for others or inappropriate laughter about people in pain*). Carefully sort through media outlets-like TV, Internet, radio or newspapers, to screen out stressful or inappropriate content that would be depressing or anxiety producing for a child. Set boundaries during the rebuilding process to protect them from additional media stress, since it is important to protect the safety of their home and minds by managing negative media exposure.

Watching catastrophic problems in other parts of the world causes more stress in an already stressful situation because you don't have the power to control the very sad stories caused by these disasters. That's why it is wise to move from negative to positive images during highly publicized disasters like Hurricane Katrina. Parents should sit down and discuss the impact of media and create limits on any stressful images that might further cause fear or anxiety in their children.

Some families without electricity discovered that not having the distractions of Internet, cable television or loud music playing in their homes allowed them to reconnect as a family on many levels. Openly discuss these issues so that home becomes a more positive place with more energy to manage the stress from this disaster without making things harder from the hidden stress of media overexposure.

Is it okay to talk about what happened to our family with others?

Silence is not golden in a critical incident, it's dangerous. One of the best things to help you as a caregiver, as well as to help others is to tell your story. Talk about where you were when the storm hit. Use this same technique to help kids talk about how they made it through the natural disaster, then add the powerful element of sensory recall by asking about what the storm sounded like, smelled like, looked like, felt like or even tasted like! Listening to the stories of others who survived brings emotional recovery faster. Also, if you see a lot of negative reaction to a particular element of the storm, then you have a better idea of what may be troubling a child and where to seek additional care to help them get past the storm stress to getting back to just being a kid again.

This is important for everyone involved, kids, grandparents, Mom, dads, employees, employers, firefighters, police officers, nurses, teachers, students and on and on. Everyone has a story about how they survived the storm and telling it helps them heal while giving others a chance to connect to their shared experience as a family, neighbors or coworkers in a powerful way. Also, ask others to share what they saw, including pastors, or people helpers like counselors and nurses since many times these professionals are so busy reaching out to meet the needs of others, they neglect to take time to deal with the storm stress in their own life.

It's normal to be tired, worn out and stressed after a natural disaster however it's not okay to ignore caring for your own needs as a caregiver. Anyone impacted by natural disasters may need to change their schedules for a while in order to take care of their own mental or physical health. Helping kids is important, however if your caregiver tank is empty, let someone else help until your strength comes back. That's best for you and those you care about since it prevents the psychological burnout caused by Storm Stress.

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