

Emotional responses of children affected by natural disasters

Anxiety or depressive reactions common after natural disasters

Children have a range of potential reactions that can be summarised as either anxiety or depressive reactions. The most predictive factor of anxiety is a feeling that you may die, or thinking you were about to die during the natural disaster. The greater the child's exposure to the crisis the greater the risk of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Phobias after the natural disaster

The post-natural disaster phobia is a direct fear about something immediately relating to the frightening event, eg. the sound of the heavy rain; the feeling of being wet; a particular smell; the sound of glass breaking or trees falling; or indeed the sight of rushing or turbulent water.

A phobia involves an intense immediate fear reaction – your body tells you that you are anxious and makes you want to avoid and run.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after natural disasters

In the immediate aftermath of a frightening event, PTSD symptoms commonly involve re-experiencing the event through nightmares, flashbacks and feeling like it is all happening again. The nervous system may also be hyperaroused leading to feeling vigilant and jumpy, sweaty, and experiencing a high pulse rate or palpitations.

Later on, children may experience symptoms such as feeling numb and detached. Parents, especially parents of primary school aged children, describe this as the child having a "personality change" characterised by being less reactive, more restrictive in feelings, or avoidant.

Depression after natural disasters

Children are more likely to develop depression if they have experienced bereavement, or a significant loss of valued objects, possessions or pets.

Bereavement and depression present as lowered mood, loss of pleasure and interest in life, sleep problems, loss of appetite and weight, and negative or pessimistic thoughts.

Two phases after a disaster

1. The acute phase – where the focus is on food, water, shelter and safety. In this phase people are encouraged to talk and are directed to the services they can access for immediate help.
2. Several months following an event, when others not directly involved tend to move on, people can feel abandoned as their suffering continues. At this time, 5-10% of children can still experience emotional difficulties. They may still experience sadness and depression or an anxiety reaction, such as PTSD. This is an appropriate time to talk to a school guidance officer, GP or Child and Youth Mental Health Service.

This resource was based on research by Professor Brett McDermott. Professor McDermott is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, expert in emotional trauma in children following large scale disasters, a Professor at the College of Medicine and Dentistry at James Cook University, an Adjunct Professor at the Queensland University of Technology and a Professorial Fellow at Mater Research.



Strategies for parents

Children affected by a natural disaster

Maintaining children's usual routines

In childhood, routines are very reassuring and give a very strong message that life goes on following a traumatic event. If a child has lost their house, is living somewhere strange or going to a different school, re-establishing family routines is extremely comforting.

Children need to see adults coping effectively and positively

Parents need to look at their own reactions.

In the eyes of a primary school aged child, the most important and competent people in the world are parents. If parents are very distressed, we need to find some way to allow, express and work through these feelings, and do it in such a way that children are not exposed to distress all the time.

Safely talk about the trauma

Talking about the trauma in a contained fashion decreases the likelihood of children re-experiencing the trauma in forms such as: nightmares, drawing endless natural disaster pictures (as some younger children do), or endless talk about natural disasters (as some older children do).

But, parents have to be able to talk about it. So again, parents have to be able to look at and manage their own levels of distress.

Tips for talking about the natural disaster

1. Stick to the facts.
2. Be very matter-of-fact.
3. Reinforce the fact that this trauma will end.
4. Give good facts – such as how many people are volunteering to help or donating money to help those who have been affected by the disaster.

Talking about it in a measured and contained way is very helpful for children. There is NO evidence that talking about the trauma in this way will stir them up.

Tips for watching television

Of all the times when there should be active family participation in television viewing during trauma is the time. Do not allow children to watch extensive news coverage about the natural disaster. If a child is watching natural disaster footage, sit with the child. When the child becomes stressed, either engage and talk about it, or say “that’s enough for today”. Endless incredibly distressing images, about things children care about (such as animals or other children), is very traumatising if not moderated by parents.

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