

## Tips for Parents

Understanding and Navigating the Path to Recovery after a Natural Disaster

Most families will heal over time. The length of recovery depends, in part, on how frightened people were and the extent of the damage and loss the family experienced.

- ❖ Some families will return to their normal routine rather quickly.
- ❖ Other will have challenges such as: repairing damage to their home, cleaning out mud or debris, replacing possessions, finding medical care, or facing financial hardship.
- ❖ Children often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help. Remain (or at least appear) calm, answer children's questions, and respond as best you can to requests.

**Children will react differently depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Here are some typical reactions that children may show:**

- ❖ Fear and worry about the safety of your family, their friends, and others including pets
- ❖ Fear of separation from loved ones
- ❖ Clinging to you, their siblings, or teachers
- ❖ Worry that there will be another hurricane
- ❖ Increased activity level
- ❖ Trouble concentrating or paying attention
- ❖ Withdrawal from others and/or from activities they like to do
- ❖ Angry outbursts or tantrums
- ❖ Aggression towards you, siblings, or friends
- ❖ Complaints about feeling sick (e.g., headaches or stomachaches)
- ❖ Changes in school performance, how they sleep, or how much they eat
- ❖ Acting out the hurricane during play or always wanting to talk about it
- ❖ Heightened reactions to everyday events, such as rainstorm, dark clouds, or high winds
- ❖ Returning to earlier behaviors, such as baby talk, bedwetting, or tantrums
- ❖ Drinking alcohol, using substances, or doing risky things
- ❖ Reacting to what they are hearing about the hurricane (e.g., from you, their friends, social media, the news)

In order to take good care of your children, you must take good care of yourself. These are typical reactions you may experience *after* a hurricane:

- ❖ Neglecting your own needs
- ❖ Trouble focusing or paying attention
- ❖ Withdrawing from others and/or from activities you usually like to do

- ❖ Angry feelings or outbursts
- ❖ Verbal or physical aggression towards your children, family, or friends
- ❖ Heightened reactions to everyday events, such as rainstorms or overcast skies
- ❖ Increased drinking of alcohol, using substances, or doing dangerous things

Be sure to:

- ❖ Take care of yourself physically. Be sure to eat healthy foods, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water, and get proper medical care.
- ❖ Monitor yourself for any respiratory issues resulting from exposure to mold.
- ❖ Avoid relying on alcohol and substances to cope.
- ❖ **Take the time to talk to other parents, and find ways to help meet each other's needs.**
- ❖ Avoid making sudden or life-altering decisions during the post-hurricane period.
- ❖ Give yourself a break. Try to limit cleanup activities, and avoid lifting heavy items or working for long periods of time.
- ❖ Make sure to still take time for the things you enjoy (spending time with friends, taking a walk, reading).
- ❖ Practice stress management techniques (yoga, slow breathing, stretches).
- ❖ Stick to routines as much as possible.
- ❖ Be aware that sounds, sights, smells, sensations (e.g., thunderstorms, mold, gas), and even your feelings may be reminders of the hurricane and can cause distressing reactions, mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions.
- ❖ Common reminders include: another hurricane named, storms, locations where you were when the hurricane occurred, anniversaries of the hurricane, and television or radio news about the event.
- ❖ You may not be aware of these at first. Be patient with **yourself and how you're coping** and reacting to the situation (e.g., meditate, talk to someone, say a prayer, take a walk, and/or think of something funny).

### Helping Children Deal with Hurricanes/Floods

- ❖ Try to keep routines as normal as possible. Children gain security from the predictability of routine, including attending school;
- ❖ Limit exposure to television and the news;
- ❖ Be honest with children and share with them as much information as they are developmentally able to handle;
- ❖ Listen to children fears and concerns;
- ❖ Parents and adults need to first deal with and assess their own responses to crisis and stress;
- ❖ Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships.

### Helping Children Adjust to Relocation after a Natural Disaster

The frequent need to relocate after a disaster creates unique coping challenges. It may contribute to the social, environmental, and psychological stress experienced by children and their families. Children will be most affected by the reactions of their parents and other family members, the duration of the relocation, their natural coping styles and emotional reactivity, and their ability to stay connected with friends and other familiar people and activities. To the extent possible, parents and other caregivers should:

- ❖ Provide opportunities for children to see friends.
- ❖ Bring personal items that the child values when staying in temporary housing.
- ❖ Establish some daily routines so that the child is able to have a sense of what to expect (including returning to school as soon as possible).
- ❖ Provide opportunities for children to share their ideas, and listen carefully to their concerns or fears.
- ❖ **Be sensitive to the disruption that relocation may cause, and be responsive to the child's needs.**
- ❖ Consider the developmental level and unique experiences of each child; it is important to remember that as children vary, so will their responses to the disruption of relocation.
  
- ❖ **Continue to reassure your kids that they're safe if they're expressing concern or worry.**
- ❖ Remain patient and open to answering questions and clarifying the situation. Answer questions briefly and honestly.
- ❖ Let them know what is happening with your family, their school, and the community.
- ❖ Explain to your children that people are working hard to restore electricity, phones, water, and gas. Tell them that the town or city will be removing debris and helping families find housing.
- ❖ Ask them for ideas on what could make them feel better. For younger children, read a favorite story, watch a favorite movie, or do a relaxing family activity.
- ❖ Remain calm so that you can teach your child how to handle stressful situations.
- ❖ Monitor your conversations. Be aware of what your friends or family are saying about the hurricane or the damage. Children listen to adults' conversations and may misinterpret what they hear, becoming unnecessarily frightened.
- ❖ **Limit your children's media exposure.**
- ❖ **Replace lost or damaged toys as soon as you're able.**
- ❖ Take care of their health. Help them get enough rest, exercise, and healthy food and water. Monitor your children for any respiratory issues.
- ❖ Review the family preparedness plan with your family to ease your children's worries.
- ❖ Maintain regular daily life. Children feel more secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, have regular mealtimes and bedtimes.
- ❖ Stick to your family rules about good behavior and respect for others. Continue family chores, but keep in mind that children may need more reminding than usual.
- ❖ Encourage children to help. Children cope better and recover sooner when they help others. Give them small cleanup tasks or other ways to help. Afterward, provide activities unrelated to the hurricane, such as playing cards or reading.
- ❖ Be extra patient as your children return to school. They may be more distracted and need extra help with homework for a while.
- ❖ Give support at bedtime. Children may be more anxious when separating from parents. Spend a little more time than usual talking, cuddling, or reading. Start the bedtime routine earlier so children get the sleep they need.
- ❖ Keep things hopeful. Your positive outlook will help your children see good things going on around them and help them through challenging times.
- ❖ Don't criticize your children for changes in behavior, such as clinging, acting out the hurricane in play, or seeking reassurance frequently. These are common reactions.
- ❖ Spend extra time with them, playing games outside, reading together indoors, or just cuddling.

- ❖ Address sleep issues. If children want to sleep in your bed (even older ones), tell them that that can be a temporary plan, but they will need to go back to sleeping in their own bed eventually.
- ❖ Be aware that sounds, sights, smells, sensations (e.g., storms, clouds), and even their feelings may be reminders of the hurricane and can cause distressing reactions, mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions.
- ❖ Common reminders include news of another hurricane, thunder storms, damaged buildings, anniversaries of the hurricane, television or radio news about the event.
- ❖ Your children may not be aware of these reminders, but you should know about reminders and how to help your children recognize and cope with them (e.g., take slow breaths, talk to you or another adult, say a prayer, and/or sing a song).

When to seek help:

- ❖ If you or your children are still having reactions that disrupt daily functioning more than six weeks after the hurricane, seek help from a mental health professional. You can also inform your children's teacher or school counselor about any reactions your children are experiencing and ask what recovery programs and services are being offered.
- ❖ If the clinician recommends counseling, ask about cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) because it has the strongest support for helping children recover from a disaster.

## Tips for School Personnel

**After a hurricane or other natural disaster, most families will heal over time. The length of recovery depends, in part, on how frightened people were and the extent of the damage and loss the family experienced. You should know:**

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Initiate the conversation: After a trauma, students may be hesitant to approach school personnel, including school counselors. Let the student know you are available to talk and to listen. Provide options for a time to talk. *Remember: listen more than you talk.* Be aware of verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the student.

**Validate feelings and experiences:** Students need to know you really hear what they are sharing. Through open-ended questions and reflective listening, let students know you not only empathize but understand the difficulties and concerns expressed.

**Answer questions and correct misinformation and misattributions:** Students may have many questions after a trauma. Answer them simply and directly at an age-appropriate level, and this will increase communication. As you talk with students, listen for misinformation and misattributions, which may lead to more confusion or magical thinking. Gently correct these, supplying accurate information.

**Educate students and caregivers about common reactions:** Students may experience many of the reactions commonly associated with trauma. These may be frightening to them or leave them feeling vulnerable. Learning about common reactions can help to normalize their reactions and encourage them to talk more openly about them. Help parents and other caregivers also learn about these reactions. They may also be experiencing similar reactions. You can discuss how this can lead to stress or conflict in the home when everyone is experiencing some distress. Knowledge can also help family members recognize distress, which can lead to increased support and patience with their children. For example, knowing that school performance may be adversely affected is important to students, parents and teachers.

**Help students identify positive coping strategies:** Although students may not have had the same experience in their past, they are likely to have run into challenges or difficult circumstances. Talk to the students about how they coped with past challenges. Reinforce positive strategies they may have used to help them through these difficulties. Teach new strategies if these are lacking, including skills for anxiety management or addressing intrusive thoughts. Some examples of positive coping include: relaxation exercises, talking to and spending time with friends and family, thought-stopping strategies for intrusive thoughts, maintaining a sense of routine, getting rest and having a healthy diet. Together with the student, generate a menu of coping strategies they have used or could use with this event.

**Identify triggers or reminders:** **Students' reactions may intensify when they experience a reminder of the trauma.** These may be obvious such as hearing sirens or seeing debris associated with a disaster or accident. Triggers can occur soon after the trauma as well as in the short- and long-term aftermath of the event. Help students identify potential triggers as well as coping strategies to use when reactions occur.

**Encourage return to extracurricular activities they enjoyed before the trauma:** Participation in extracurricular activities can help students begin to feel their worlds can have some semblance of normal again.

**Encourage activities that promote help and healing:** Students who are experiencing distress due to trauma or loss can augment their coping and healing when they reach out and help others who may also be distressed. Talk to students about ideas they may have to reach out and help others in similar or even unrelated situations.

**Maintain regular communication with the student's teachers and caregivers:** Continue to check-in with adults important in the student's life. Teachers can give you insight about how the student is coping in class, and parents can provide similar information about how things are going at home.

Be available for the immediate, short-, and long-term after a trauma: Once you make a connection with students who have experienced a trauma, you become someone they may turn to when they are having difficulties over time. It only takes a moment to ask, "Tell me how things are going." This lets students know you care and you remember about their trauma. It is also likely they will turn to you when other challenges arise in the future.

In addition, school personnel should:

- ❖ If possible, determine the status of every child in the school, particularly those who have not returned after the disaster incident. Develop an outreach strategy for children who are displaced and living in shelters or temporary housing.
- ❖ Identify ways for students to stay in contact with displaced classmates.
- ❖ Utilize an advisory committee of students to help identify ways that students might prioritize positive school activities in order to help them regain a sense of normalcy.
- ❖ Permit survivors to retell their stories in a safe environment that avoids vicarious traumatization. Provide opportunities for children to discuss how they are coping. Use creative arts (e.g., drama, art, music, photography) to help them express their emotions.
- ❖ Help connect families to community resources, and maintain current contacts with disaster-related support services. Provide information to parents about available physical and behavioral healthcare services, and if possible, help provide child care while they are meeting with agencies.
- ❖ Anticipate the need for increased before- and after-school child care, and explore options to provide that service.
- ❖ Incorporate information about the disaster into related subject areas, as appropriate. Science, math, history, and language arts are especially relevant.