



MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION IN TEXAS

# HELPING CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

A Children's Mental Health Guide for Parents,  
Guardians and other Caregivers

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A disaster or traumatic event like a hurricane or flood is something that people, especially children, never forget. Whether your child personally experiences, witnesses on television or hears reports and discussions about a disaster, children of all ages are affected by disasters or traumatic events. They are affected in different ways and at different times. Some children are more emotional than others, and their individual reactions may differ quite a bit. Life history, personality, age and a child's experiences during and after an event all play a role in how they respond. As parents, guardians and caregivers it is important that you are informed and ready to help your child if your child is showing signs of stress.

## STRONG FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS ARE NORMAL

For many children, a scary or life threatening event such as a hurricane or flood can bring on strong feelings and mixed emotions. This is normal for children of any age who have seen, heard about or lived through, a natural disaster or other distressing event.

Not all children that experience disaster-related trauma react in the same way or at the same time. Some children are able to deal with the events of the disaster and go on with their lives. Some have reactions right away and others may seem fine for weeks or months, then suddenly break down in emotion.

Crying, anger, guilt, headaches, stomachaches, trouble concentrating, nightmares, flashbacks or disturbing thoughts are all common feelings and emotions your child may have after a traumatic ordeal.

Other normal and common reactions your child may have include:

- ◆ Trouble having friendships
- ◆ Problems in school (Poor grades, behavior or attitude)
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating
- ◆ Worries about dying at an early age
- ◆ Feelings of helplessness or guilt
- ◆ Jittery or jumpy feelings
- ◆ No interest in doing fun or enjoyable activities
- ◆ Aggressive, mean, or even violent behavior
- ◆ Trouble being in places or situations that bring back memories
- ◆ Problems with reality; pretending that the event did not happen

If these or other stress-related symptoms last for several months and your child is not feeling any better your child may have what is called **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD**.

## ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

PTSD is a set of symptoms that occur after a person has seen, heard about or lived through, a disaster or frightening event. People of all ages can experience PTSD. Approximately three million children are diagnosed with PTSD each year. For most people, stress reactions usually lessen or go away after a few weeks, but when the symptoms are more severe or interfere with a child's everyday activities, it is important to get them the help they need in order to cope with their feelings. Only a doctor or mental health professional can determine if your child has PTSD.

## PTSD IS A TREATABLE ILLNESS

Many times PTSD is treated with **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy**, a form of therapy that shows your child how to calm their mind and body so they can feel better, think more clearly, and make better decisions. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy also teaches your child how certain thinking patterns cause their symptoms and makes them feel anxious, depressed, or angry or even cause your child to make poor choices. In some cases, your child may receive a combination of medication and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy to treat and help reduce their symptoms.

## HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE

Let your child know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens. Reassurance is key to helping children of all ages through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Older children may also want to discuss the emotional, physical, and financial impact of the event. Answer questions about the event honestly and age-appropriately letting them know that in some cases you do not have the answer to their question.



- ◆ Don't be afraid to let your child talk about the event.
- ◆ Listen to your child's views of the events at the time of the disaster and about the events that followed. Ask questions and let your child express feelings about these events.
- ◆ Let your child know that you care about their feelings, know that they are upset and will work together to feel better.

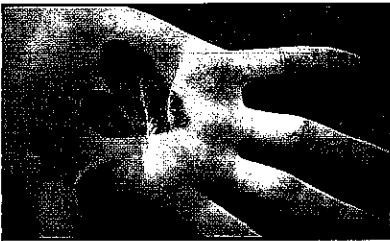


- ◆ Encourage your child to express emotions through talking, writing, drawing or painting if they are unable to talk about their feelings.
- ◆ Find a way for your child to help people who were affected by the disaster. Doing an activity like making cards, or volunteering helps children feel useful and improves their self esteem.
- ◆ Provide a daily schedule to

help your child know what will happen throughout the day.

- ◆ Provide careful supervision and additional support for children, especially those with emotional problems such as depression.
- ◆ Let your child know that they are safe and that you love them.
- ◆ Limit activities that may cause anxiety such as television news, scary movies or stories.

### TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELF



As a parent, guardian or caregiver of a child troubled by a disaster or traumatic event it is important that you take care of yourself—especially if you too have gone through the trauma. This is particularly important as it

will help you to better listen to your child and give them the understanding and support that they need to cope and heal.

- ◆ Return to day-to-day structure as soon as possible
- ◆ Spend time with others
- ◆ Use your personal support systems, family and friends when you are ready to talk or if you need help caring for your child
- ◆ Keep a journal of how you feel
- ◆ Plan healthy activities to help you feel good
- ◆ Try to be patient with others who are also under stress
- ◆ Give yourself permission to feel moody, nervous or blue
- ◆ Make as many daily decisions as possible to have a feeling of control over your life
- ◆ Try to rest and eat healthy, regular meals
- ◆ Get help if your feelings are keeping you from helping your child or interfering with your daily life

### WHO CAN HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILD FEEL BETTER?

Working through feelings after a disaster is a normal part of coping. You and your child do not have to deal with everything alone. There are people who can and want to help you and your child get through this challenging time. A teacher, counselor, religious leader, social worker, doctor, or mental health professional may give you or your child the support you need to get better, and get your lives on track.

Information in this brochure is adapted from materials by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency, and the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



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## HELPFUL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION FOR THE FAMILY

### TEXAS RESOURCES

#### Mental Health Association in Texas

<http://www.mhatexas.org>

#### United Way

Dial 211

#### Red Cross-Central Texas

<http://www.centex.redcross.org/>

#### Texas Department of State Health Services

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/>

(800) 252-8154

#### Texas Council of Community Mental Health Mental Retardation Centers, Inc.

<http://www.txcouncil.com/centers.html>

### NATIONAL RESOURCES

#### American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster>

#### Anxiety Disorders Association of America

<http://www.adaa.org/index.cfm>

#### FEMA for Kids

[www.fema.gov/kids/](http://www.fema.gov/kids/)

#### National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD)

<http://www.ncptsd.org/>

#### National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH)

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

#### National Mental Health Association

<http://www.nmha.org/>

(800) 969-NMHA (6642) INFORMATION

(800) SUICIDE (784-2433) CRISIS LINE

#### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

(800) 273-TALK (8255)

#### Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance

<http://www.ptsdalliance.org/>

(877) 507-PTSD

#### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA)

<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/>