

Crisis Counseling Guide

Adolescence (14-18 years)

If an emergency/disaster occurs, it is important to recognize normal reactions of children to the event. Reactions of children are generally age related and specific. This section provides an overview of normal reactions within determined age groups and helpful hints for enabling children to cope with the disaster-precipitated stress. Also included is a list of symptoms, which may warrant referral to a mental health professional.

Disaster may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children. During a disaster, your family may have to leave their home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused or frightened. As a parent, you will need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears. Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

- Children experience a variety of reactions and feelings in response to a disaster and need special attention to meet their needs.
- The two most common indicators of distress in children are changes in their behavior and behavior regression. A change in behavior is any behavior the child exhibits that is not typical for them. For example, an outgoing child may become very shy and withdrawn. Regression is where past behaviors occur, such as thumb sucking or baby-talk.
- Children may experience a variety of reactions and feelings based on their age. Helpful hints for coping with these reactions are listed.

Reactions to disasters may appear immediately after the disaster or after several days or weeks. Most of the time the symptoms will pass after the child readjusts. When symptoms do continue, most likely a more serious emotional problem has developed. In this case, referring the child to a mental health worker who is experienced in working with children and trauma would be necessary.

A disaster may stimulate fears concerning the loss of their families and fears related to their bodies. It threatens their natural branching away from their family because of the family's need to pull together. Disasters disrupt their peer relationships and school life. As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to trauma. They may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Teenagers may show more risk-taking behaviors than normal (reckless driving, use of drugs, etc.). Teens may feel overwhelmed by their emotions, and may be unable to discuss them with their families.

Typical Responses:

- Headaches, or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Confusion/poor concentration
- Poor performance
- Aggressive behaviors
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Changes in peer group or friends
- Psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., rashes, bowel problems, asthma)
- Appetite and sleep disturbance
- Agitation or decrease in energy level
- Indifference
- Irresponsible and/or delinquent behavior
- Decline in struggling with parental control

Helpful Hints:

- Encourage participation in community rehabilitation work
- Encourage resumption of social activities, athletics, clubs, etc.
- Encourage discussion of disaster experiences with peers, family, and significant others
- Temporarily reduce expectations for level of school and general performance
- Encourage but do not insist upon discussion of disaster fears within the family setting