



# Civil Unrest Resources

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## Staying Safe During Civil Unrest

In times of widespread political demonstrations and civil unrest, your best course of action is to avoid any areas in which marches and similar activities may occur. If, however, you find yourself caught up in a protest and are worried for your safety, a few precautions can help you avoid the worst and get home safely:

- **During times of political uncertainty, it is important to keep an eye on the news.** Large-scale demonstrations are generally announced days or even weeks in advance. Knowing this can help you avoid the affected areas.
- **If a large-scale demonstration is expected, your best course of action is to stay home and avoid the area altogether.** If you must leave home, make sure you plan multiple routes to and from your destination. You never know which streets or public transportation lines may be affected.
- **Keep in mind that demonstrations can take place with little or no notice and, in extreme cases, quickly turn violent.** Exercise caution if you find yourself unexpectedly in the vicinity of large gatherings.
- **In such situations, always be aware of your surroundings.** If suddenly surrounded by a crowd, avoid confrontation by keeping your head down and moving with the flow of people.
- **While keeping a low profile, seek an avenue of escape.** Don't run or panic.
- **If you are with loved ones, hold hands or lock elbows.** Pick up children so there is no danger of them being trampled. Staying together is a priority.
- **If you find yourself in the middle of the crowd, move toward the outside and away from any excitement or activity.** Once you find an opening, walk away from the crowd as calmly as possible.
- **Look for a doorway, an alley, a side street or a safe building** in which to shelter.
- **If possible, find a safe enclosed area.** Riots tend to happen on the streets, so a building can offer some protection. Stay away from doors and windows and try to find sheltered rooms. Make a note of all exits in case you must leave in a hurry.
- **Once the crowd has passed, exit the area moving in the opposite direction.**
- **Do your best to stay informed as events unfold.** Social media may provide rapid coverage of events, but keep in mind that it can be less accurate than established media sources. Try to access as many resources as possible.

Although civil unrest is by nature unpredictable, staying calm and monitoring the situation are key to keeping yourself and your loved ones safe in high-risk situations.

## Resiliency in Response to Political Discord

For organizations, change never ends; that is the one constant we can all agree on. While an organization is constantly changing on the inside, it is even more prominent for events on the outside to directly affect the employees. Such events range from natural disasters to political strife and can affect an employee directly at home. Regardless of how capable and in control we may feel, there will be times of unrest and anxiety at any workplace.

Of the many factors that go into weathering such challenges, whether personal or business-related, the most important may be resiliency. Resilience is the measure of our ability to welcome challenges, overcome adversity and get back on track to achieving our goals. With that in mind, here is some information on resilience amid changing times.

### What is resilience?

Resilience is more than coping; it's about confronting crises and difficult situations without getting overwhelmed by them. Resilient people are better able to handle life's stressors and to adapt to changing situations. Being resilient can help protect you from depression, stress and anxiety, too.

Some of the characteristics of resilient people include:

- Strong relationships
- Self-motivation
- A positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities
- Skills in communication and problem solving
- Self-awareness
- Emotional control

### Resiliency in the Workplace

Today we are living in an environment of constant change. This change is creating a lot of stress. An escalating trend of anxiety, anger and negative impact on individuals has resulted. Having a degree of resiliency can help. Resilience means controlling your ego, not panicking in the face of a setback, and having the patience and ability to stay focused on long-term goals. Resilience can help you weather storms, remain steady and make rational decisions instead of being driven by emotion.

### Political Discord and Stress

Everyone is affected by political discord, it doesn't matter which side you are on. Such tension can affect every aspect of a person's life from relationships, health and work. At times, tension can surmount to a point where people feel anxious and stressed about the situation. While current political tension can be stressful, there are things you can do to cope with this challenging environment:

- **Find a healthy balance.** Your work is important, but it's unhealthy for you mentally, physically and socially if you live, breathe and sleep your job. Get off the rollercoaster and away from the stress and uncertainty by surrounding yourself with friends and family and finding positive outlets to spend your free time.
- **Be positive.** There is only so much you can control. How you feel about your situation is one of those things. Look for the silver lining and practice positive self-affirmations—it can change your mood and outlook on life.
- **Look for the gray.** Even though it may seem so, not everything is black and white or gain and loss. Search for the middle ground. It can be a far less stressful place.

### How to Manage Anger and Stress

When facing change, it's fairly common for those in the workplace today to feel anger and stress. It's important, however, to remember that allowing such emotions to run you leads to mental, physical and social consequences. If anger is getting the best of you, there are a number of steps you can take to manage it in a healthier way:

- **Relax and calm down.** Take deep breaths. Count to 10 and let the tension escape from your body. Try relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Remove yourself from the environment.** If a person or situation is causing you to feel extremely angry, or if you feel that you cannot talk about your emotions or express your anger positively, excuse yourself and walk away. Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.
- **Identify the source.** What exactly is making you angry? When you recognize the cause, approach it in a positive, productive way.
- **Think before taking action.** Carefully consider the consequences of your response. Will you regret saying what is on your mind? Is there a better way to express your anger than the first impulse that came to you? Do not overreact. Avoid making assumptions or guesses; know the facts before you speak out about someone or something.
- **Assert yourself appropriately.** If you feel strongly about something, do not hold back from saying what is on your mind. Let the other person know what you want. Be clear and direct in your message.
- **Divert your attention.** If there is nothing you can do to change the situation, (e.g., you are stuck in a terrible traffic jam that is making you increasingly irritated), think of something else. Focus on a pleasant thought, an upcoming holiday or a happy memory.
- **Find humor in the situation.** When appropriate, learn to laugh at life and conflicts with others. Break the tension and defuse the situation with a smile, a joke or a funny (but not sarcastic) comment.
- **Be patient.** Try to be tolerant and empathetic of others. Attempt to understand their situations and behaviors.
- **Find a substitute outlet for anger.** Instead of acting on an aggressive urge, find a creative outlet for your energy.
- **Start an exercise program.** Take up a physically challenging new sport like kickboxing.
- **Try a new hobby or artistic endeavor** such as painting.
- **Get advice from others.** If you simply do not know how to deal with an angry feeling or situation, ask friends or family for suggestions on how they got through similar situations.

There are also a number of ways you can alleviate stress in your day-to-day life. Here are 10:

- **Get enough sleep.** If necessary, use an alarm clock to remind you to go to bed.
- **Schedule a realistic day.** If you can't avoid back-to-back appointments, try to at least give yourself a few moments for a breathing spell.
- **Do not rely on your memory.** Write down appointment times, assignment due dates, etc. As an old Chinese proverb states, "The palest ink is better than the most retentive memory."
- **Be prepared to wait.** A paperback, crossword puzzle or mobile phone game can make a wait in a line almost pleasant.
- **Procrastination is stressful.** Whatever you want to do tomorrow, do today; whatever you want to do today, do it now.
- **Relax your standards.** The world will not end if the grass does not get mowed this weekend or if the sheets have to be changed on Sunday instead of Saturday.
- **Learn to say 'no.'** Saying no to extra projects, social events and activities you do not have the time or energy for takes practice.

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Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

## Dealing With the Effects of Social Upheaval

Uncertain political times and the resulting upheaval can lead to personal trauma. As a result, you and those you care about will likely experience emotional distress where feelings such as fear, anger and sadness can be overwhelming. You may find that your reactions interfere with your concentration and the normal demands of life. Taking a moment to consider how a recent tragedy has affected you can help you and those around you.

### Safety and Security Come First

Make sure that you have checked in with family and friends who will be concerned about your safety. Are those in transit safe and situated? Are conferences and out-of-town work commitments still scheduled?

When you take up regular travel and work again, always think ahead about the possibility of danger in public, and plan how you and your family will stay safe. In large buildings and public areas, always know the location of stairwells and emergency exits. Understand the emergency evacuation procedures in the building where you work, and make sure your family members have done the same, including your children understanding their evacuation plan at school. Of course when traveling, you do not need to feel paranoid, but just be aware of your surroundings at all times. Always keep your luggage with you and reject any packages from strangers.

### Support Family, Friends and Co-workers

Supporting family, friends and co-workers mostly means being a good listener. Listen with empathy and understanding to the other person's feelings.

Parents will be a source of support for their kids, managers to their staff, and family and friends to each other. Whether communicating with an adult or a child, acknowledge the awful reality and permit expression of feelings. When appropriate, try to put the catastrophe into perspective with reminders of how rare and unusual the traumatic events are.

Be honest with yourself and those around you. You and your friends and family may be experiencing distress that interferes with your well-being and ability to cope with the normal demands of life. Review the list of common reactions below.

### Symptoms of Distress

1. Emotional withdrawal from friends and family
2. Confusion, disorientation or an unusually short attention span
3. Diminished ability to solve problems
4. Interruption of normal eating or sleeping habits, or nightmares
5. An abrupt change in regular daily activities
6. Increased alcohol consumption
7. Changes in speech patterns
8. Antisocial acts

People in distress also sometimes experience heightened emotions of fear, guilt, anxiety, denial, depression and anger, as well as physical fatigue, chest pains, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, sweating and tremors.

### How to Cope

First, understand that such reactions to distress are normal and will likely subside over time. People usually go through the predictable stages of coping with distress or grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance.

There are ways you can reduce the impact of these events on your health and well-being. To help the healing process along, consider the following information:

- **Take care of yourself.** You cannot help others if your own perspective is out of balance. A crisis leaves us all with less confidence and control, and it is all the more important to control what we can.

- **Get in touch with how you give meaning to life.** Draw on your spiritual faith and personal values to remind you of the larger perspective. Take a few minutes every day to reflect on the positive aspects of your life.
- **Understand that everything will not immediately go back to normal as it was before the traumatic events,** but look for the evidence that you are able to continue forward with life, work and love despite the distress.
- **Try to get back to eating regular meals.** Your body needs essential nutrients during stressful times, so not feeding it enough or overindulging in sweets or fats can throw your body off balance. If your body is off balance, your emotions may be too.
- **It is very important in stressful times to maintain healthy sleep patterns.** Try not to sleep too much or too little. Your energy level and emotional state could be adversely affected by changes in your sleep behavior.
- **If you exercise, try to get back into your normal routine.** Because exercise patterns are linked directly to sleep patterns and caloric intake needs, getting your body back on track will improve your ability to cope with stress. In addition, chemicals released in the brain during exercise have been shown to relieve stress.
- **Reestablish your routines.** Try to find joy by taking part in productive activities and projects. If you participate in regular activities, try to pick up where you left off. Not only do these activities relieve stress and help you feel like life is back to normal, but the sense of community that you build may help you through difficult times.
- **Volunteer your time or donate to charity.** Whether you make this a one-time effort to do your part or decide to make it a regular activity, doing something good for your community is a great way to deal with stress and improve the quality of life for yourself and others.

The landscape of safety can become permanently altered by a tragedy. It shakes up all of us to some degree. The events are sobering and not to be sensationalized.

Rather, now is the time to assure safety, to support others and to take care of yourself. The coming days and weeks will provide numerous opportunities to memorialize and learn from a crisis.

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# Coping With a Traumatic Event

Most people have experienced traumatic and stressful events in their lives. These times are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

## Common Responses to Tragedy

Emotional responses to traumatic events may vary. People may exhibit feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness and changes in appetite and sleep pattern, as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people start to feel normal again.

Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that lasts for many weeks or months after the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

1. Symptoms of re-living include flashbacks, nightmares and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feeling guilty, extreme fear of harm and the numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
2. Symptoms of avoidance include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or feeling estranged from others.
3. Symptoms of increased arousal include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being isolated and not being able to complete daily tasks.

## Ways to Cope with Tragedy

There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events:

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma
- Keep to your usual routine
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself
- Turn to family, friends and clergy for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities
- Recognize that you cannot control everything
- Recognize the need for trained help, and call a local mental health center

There are also things you can do to help your child:

- Let your child know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens
- Encourage your child to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments
- Return to daily routines

## When to Contact a Doctor about PTSD

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away or they last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the

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# When Anxiety Becomes a Problem

Everyone experiences stress and anxiety to some degree. If you find yourself in a constant state of worry and continually unable to relax, you may be experiencing generalized anxiety disorder. Thankfully, there are several treatment options to help you keep your anxiety from interfering with your enjoyment of life. If you suspect that you have an anxiety disorder, seek professional help, and educate yourself on the condition.

## Understanding Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Each of us has normal, everyday fears and concerns that we can usually manage or resolve. Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), however, is manifested by chronic, exaggerated worries that usually are provoked by no apparent cause or other illness. Though these persistent fears are typically irrational, the individual often expects the worst to happen, such as a deadly crash, a family disaster, a sudden sickness or financial ruin.

Unlike many people with other anxiety disorders, like phobias, people with GAD usually do not avoid frightening objects or situations. They are able to function and maintain relationships. Yet the constant worries and sense of dread they experience often limit their ability to experience life to the fullest. The unresolved anxiety also can trigger a variety of health problems and symptoms, including:

- Nervousness
- Trembling
- Twitching
- Sweating
- Irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Shortness of breath
- Muscle tension
- Lightheadedness
- Indigestion and abdominal pain
- Difficulty falling or remaining asleep

Though researchers do not know exactly what triggers GAD, they believe it probably is caused by a combination of stressful life events and biological factors. Other disorders may be present in addition to GAD, such as panic disorder or depression. In general, the onset of GAD is gradual and often begins in childhood. Symptoms have a tendency to decrease with age.

If you have worried excessively about a variety of problems over six months or longer, you may have GAD. Do not be afraid to seek help. A therapist can talk to you about what you are experiencing and put you in touch with support resources and a specialist who can help treat the disorder.

## Treatment

There are several treatment options that your physician and a therapist can coordinate. Your involvement in treatment will require patience and diligence. Anxieties take time to resolve. The more you learn about the condition and recognize your patterns of thought, the better chance you have of effectively managing GAD.

Treatment includes:

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy.** This therapy works with a combination of behavioral techniques like breathing and relaxation exercises that help you change the way you think about your anxiety.
- **Habituation exercises.** This approach can help individuals confront their fears and learn to diminish anxiety.
- **Systematic desensitization (also called exposure and response prevention).** These exercises help individuals overcome their GAD behaviors by exposing them to the frightening thoughts or situations.
- **Deep-breathing exercises and relaxation techniques.** These techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation exercises which teach you to tense, hold, focus on and slowly release different muscle groups, help reduce the symptoms of anxiety.
- **Medication.** Your doctor or a psychiatrist can talk with you about medications that are used to control anxiety successfully.

Another widely used treatment method is traditional talk therapy: working with a therapist to resolve your fears and problems. A therapist may help you uncover the causes of your anxieties and suggest coping techniques.

In talk therapy, you learn to recognize how certain thoughts can provoke anxiety symptoms and how to change those thought patterns to decrease future anxiety episodes. Your therapist also may prescribe medication in combination with talk or behavioral therapy.

Your doctor also may suggest eliminating caffeine and alcohol from your diet. These drugs have been known to cause or increase anxiety.

## Anxiety Disorder Self-test

Take this self-test, and talk to your doctor about the results. Answer yes or no to each question. Are you troubled by:

- Repeated, unexpected panic attacks during which you suddenly are overcome by intense fear or discomfort for no apparent reason?
- Persistent, intrusive thoughts, impulses or images that you cannot get out of your mind (such as a preoccupation with getting dirty, worry about the order of things or aggressive or sexual impulses)?
- A powerful and ongoing fear of social situations involving unfamiliar people?
- Excessive worrying, for six months or more, about a number of events or activities?
- Fear of places or situations where getting help or escaping might be difficult, such as in a crowd or on a bridge?
- Shortness of breath or a racing heart for no apparent reason?
- A persistent and unreasonable fear of an object or situation, such as flying, heights, animals, blood, etc.?
- Being unable to travel alone?
- Spending too much time each day doing things over and over again (e.g., handwashing or counting)?
- Having tense muscles or problems sleeping more often than not?
- Experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury to yourself or a loved one (e.g., military combat, a serious car accident)?
- Your anxiety interfering with your daily life?

Do not let anxiety control you; learn to control it by seeking help and educating yourself on the topic.

Get involved in an anxiety support group, and ask friends and family to help you identify any recurrence of irrational behaviors. When you feel anxiety coming on, attempt to rationalize your fears and relax.

## Answering Questions Children Have About Tragedy

Children often have numerous questions during times of crisis. The information below explores some of the questions that parents and teachers frequently ask about ways to discuss violence and tragedies with children.

### **How do I deal with the different emotions that children may have about tragic and violent issues?**

It is natural and healthy for children to experience a wide range of emotions about any particular tragedy. Some children will be sad, anxious and even fearful for their own families' safety, others will be confused about how to make sense of the events and others will have little reaction. Some will respond with excitement and anticipation, while others will have a mix of emotions: fear, sorrow and worry, for example. Deep feelings are not atypical for children trying to come to terms with death and suffering and the reasons that people resort to violence. It is our role as adults to help them explore these feelings.

The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For early elementary-school children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older elementary- and middle-school children it will be issues of fairness and care for others. For adolescents it will often involve the ethical dilemmas posed by the situation.

Listening closely and discerning what some underlying issues might be will help your responses be more productive. In some areas, such as concerns for personal safety, we can provide reassurance, while in other areas our role should be that of a listener. Listening in and of itself can be reassuring to children.

Bringing closure to discussions of feelings is sometimes difficult. Rather than trying to summarize or falsely reassure children, it is best to simply thank them for sharing so deeply and affirm how much they care about others and the world around them. You can express that it is this caring that makes you proud and gives you strength and hope.

### **After I have listened to children's concerns, how do I respond?**

It is best not to jump in and tell children everything we think or know about the particular situation, even after we have heard what is on their minds. Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful responses we can make. Whatever our response, it is important that we provide reassurance to the children we care about.

First, we can respond to the obvious items of misinformation that they have picked up and help them distinguish fantasy from reality. We can also answer children's direct questions in simple and straightforward terms. If you think there is more to the question than is first apparent, such as underlying confusion or unexpressed anxiety, ask for an explanation of where the question came from and then listen carefully. Keep your responses brief and simple. Follow the lead of children's questions and give no more information than is asked for. Going off on one's own tangent is an easy trap for adults to fall into when answering a child's questions.

The answers to some questions that children ask are not clear and straightforward. When children ask such questions as, "Why did people do this?" we can explain that some people think one way about it and others think another. It is important for children to hear that there are differences of opinion and different ways of seeing the conflict.

Finally, we can give our children the opportunity to continue to explore their questions and to learn from this conflict. For instance, war play is a common phenomenon, particularly among young boys. Many use it to further explore and work out what they are hearing in regard to a violent situation. Some schools decide that war play is not appropriate on school grounds. If children we know are engaging in war play, we can utilize it as an opportunity to discuss what the games mean to them. If we are disturbed by it, we can share with them any concerns we have about that form of play.

For older children and adolescents, many crises raise important issues about the ethics of violence, the ways conflicts are best resolved and ensuring school security. For adolescents concerned about their own potential involvement, it raises questions about their own options and choices. These are important issues for young people to talk about and think through with adults they trust.

At the same time, young people can derive hope by learning about conflict resolution and developing concrete skills in resolving conflict nonviolently. This is an opportunity for them to explore alternative means

of resolving conflicts and ways that, even when a conflict becomes violent, people continue to work toward its resolution. In addition, it would be valuable for them to think about how they may pursue a constructive response that promotes peace and security in their schools and neighborhoods.

### **Should I share my beliefs with children?**

Because the opinions of adults in a child's life carry such weight (especially with younger children), we recommend that you focus on what the child is thinking and feeling. Stating an opinion, especially in the early stages of discussion, can block open communication by preventing children who hold different opinions from openly sharing and discussing them for fear of disapproval. Since most older children are aware of their parents' opinions anyway, it is perhaps more important to help children to think critically about many points of view and arrive at their own well thought-out conclusions.

However, it is important to communicate to children the value of hearing other points of view and respecting the people who hold them. Helping children understand that the issue of violence, for example, is a complex one allows them to feel that their opinions can make a contribution to our understanding of the issue.

We recommend that you stress the importance of examining a variety of points of view, as well as your own, and their learning to appreciate what each has to offer.

Difference of opinion can be very healthy, and something from which both adults and children can learn.

Often, however, these differences degenerate into unproductive arguments where both the adult and child become entrenched even more in their positions. Constructive dialogue begins with a good deal of listening and a sincere effort to understand what the other person is saying and why he or she sees it as valid. It is important to avoid statements that categorically diminish the adolescent's opinions such as "When you grow up you will understand that" or "You don't know what you're talking about." Instead, restate what the child has said to make sure you understand it. Listen carefully to the child's point of view, and ask questions to help him or her clarify it. Rather than countering those statements with which you disagree, ask questions that can help you understand the child's perspective.

There are respectful ways of disagreeing that you can model by stating your disagreements in the form of, "I experience things differently. I think that . . ." rather than telling the child that he or she is wrong. The goal, after all, is not to dictate opinions to children, but rather to help them make their own reasoned decisions about controversial issues. Finally, help your child understand that a person's opinions can change and that a decision reached today might be different tomorrow with the addition of new ideas and information.

### **How can I talk with children if I feel that my own grasp of the facts and issues is inadequate?**

Fortunately, we do not need to be experts in order to listen to children. The questions of very young children seldom require complicated technical answers.

When older children ask for information we do not have, it is fine to say something like, "That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer. Let's find out together." The process of figuring out where to get the information and going through the steps to obtain it can be a powerfully reassuring experience for children, especially when a trusted adult participates with them. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. If a child's questions do not lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is equally effective to say something like, "I don't know the answer to that, and I'm not sure anyone does. I do know, however, that many good thinkers throughout the world are working hard to understand this issue."

### **How can I reassure and comfort children when I honestly do not feel hopeful myself?**

On one hand, it is certainly appropriate for adults to acknowledge that they, too, are concerned about the state of the world. On the other hand, we must not impose our feelings on children. If you really believe that your own concerns may be overwhelming to the children in your life, then you might seek out an adult support system for yourself. This might be a group of other adults with similar feelings who need to share and discuss their concerns and questions. If a support group is not practical, then you might find a competent, caring individual to talk with to sort out your feelings. It then becomes easier to offer genuine help to children.

### **What can I say that is both comforting and reassuring?**

Just by listening to children you are providing reassurance. By your ability to hear calmly even their wildest concerns, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to deal with. By trying to understand children, you communicate that their feelings are neither abnormal nor silly, and you communicate the reassurance that they do not have to be alone with their concerns.

[Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.](#)

# Helping Children Cope With Violence and Disasters

Natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, along with violent acts including shootings and terrorist threats or actions, have two consequences. First, they physically harm property and people, often resulting in deaths. Secondly, they cause trauma in survivors of these events. Trauma is harm to a person's body or mind.

Children are very sensitive to upsetting events, and often struggle to make sense of trauma. They may have emotional reactions, or they may hurt deeply. Children also often have a difficult time recovering from frightening experiences.

Parents and family members play important roles in helping children who experience violence or disaster cope with the trauma caused by the event. They should help protect children from further trauma, and find appropriate medical care and counselling. They can also help young people avoid or overcome emotional problems that can result from trauma.

## What is trauma?

There are two types of trauma—physical and mental. Physical trauma includes the body's response to serious injury and threat. Mental trauma includes frightening thoughts and painful feelings. They are the mind's response to serious injury. Mental trauma can produce strong feelings. It can also produce extreme behaviors such as intense fear or helplessness, withdrawal or detachment, lack of concentration, irritability, sleep disturbance, aggression, hyper vigilance (intensely watching for more distressing events) or flashbacks (sensing that the event is reoccurring). Fear could also be a response, including the fear that a loved one will be hurt or killed.

It is believed that more direct exposures to traumatic events causes greater harm. For instance, in a school shooting an injured student will probably be more severely affected emotionally than a student who was in another part of the building. However, second-hand exposure to violence can also be traumatic. This includes seeing or hearing about violence through news stories or newspaper photographs.

## Helping Young Trauma Survivors

Helping children affected by tragedy begins at the scene of the event. Most children recover within a few weeks, although some will need help for longer periods of time. Grief (a deep emotional response to loss) may take months or years to resolve. Grief may be re-experienced or worsened by news reports or the event's anniversary.

Some children may need help from a mental health professional, while others may turn to religious leaders, community leaders, teachers, other adults and friends for assistance.

The first step in helping those affected by trauma is to identify the children who need assistance. The following may be signs that a child has been affected by trauma or a violent act:

- The child refuses to go places that remind them of the event
- The child seems emotionally numb
- The child shows little reaction to the event
- The child starts to behave dangerously or erratically

To help children cope with trauma, adults should:

- Attend to children
- Listen to what children say
- Accept/do not argue about their feelings
- Help them cope with the reality of their experiences
- Reduce effects of other potential sources of stress in their life
- Monitor the healing process over time
- Immediately address severe reactions to the experience
- Attend to sudden changes in behaviors, speech, language use and emotions
- Remind children that adults love and support them

## How Parents and Family Can Help

After violence or a disaster parents and family should:

- Identify and address their personal feelings
- Explain to children what happened
- Let children know that you love them, that the event was not their fault, that you will take care of them (but only if you can; be honest) and that it is okay for them to feel upset
- Allow children to cry and feel sadness
- Let children talk about feelings
- Let them write about feelings
- Let them draw pictures

Parents and other adults should not:

- Expect children to be brave or tough
- Make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Get angry if children show strong emotions
- Get upset if children begin bed-wetting, acting out or thumb-sucking
- Make promises they cannot keep

If children have trouble sleeping give them extra attention, let them sleep with a light on or let them sleep in your room (for a short time).

Try to keep normal routines for activities like going to sleep, eating dinner, watching TV, reading books, exercising and playing games. If you cannot keep old routines try to make new ones together.

Help children feel in control. Ways to do this include letting them choose meals, pick out their own clothes and letting them make decisions for themselves whenever possible.

## How Children May React to Trauma

Children's reactions to trauma can occur immediately after the event or appear much later. Reactions can differ in severity and cover a range of behaviors. People from different cultures may have their own ways of reacting.

One common response is loss of trust. Another is fear of the traumatic event occurring again. Some children are more vulnerable to trauma's effects. Children with existing mental health problems or who have experienced other traumatic events may be more affected than others.

Children under five years of age may react in a number of ways to traumatic events:

- Facial expressions of fear
- Clinging to parent or caregiver
- Crying or screaming
- Whimpering or trembling
- Moving aimlessly
- Becoming immobile
- Returning to behaviors like thumb-sucking, bed-wetting and being afraid of the dark

Children between six and 11 have a range of reactions to trauma. They may:

- Isolate themselves from friends and family
- Complain of unfounded physical problems
- Become quiet around friends, family and teachers
- Develop unfounded fears
- Have nightmares or other sleep problems
- Become depressed
- Become irritable or disruptive
- Become filled with guilt
- Have outbursts of anger
- Feel emotionally numb
- Start fights
- Perform poorly in school and on homework
- Be unable to concentrate
- Refuse to go to school

Children between 12 and 17 have various reactions to trauma, including:

- Flashbacks to the traumatic event (flashbacks are the mind reliving the event)
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Drug, alcohol and tobacco use and abuse
- Antisocial behaviors including being disruptive, disrespectful and destructive
- Physical complaints
- Nightmares or other sleep problems
- Isolation or confusion
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts

Adolescents may feel guilty about the event for not preventing injury or deaths. They may also have thoughts of revenge.

### **Contacting a Mental Health Professional**

Some children will experience prolonged problems after a traumatic event. These may include grief, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many trauma survivors will need counselling from a mental health professional to help them deal with their problems.

You should contact a mental health professional if, after a month in a safe environment, children are not able to perform normal routines or they start to develop new symptoms. Also, some symptoms may require immediate attention. Contact a mental health professional if these symptoms occur:

- Flashbacks
- Racing heart and sweating
- Being easily startled
- Being emotionally numb
- Being very sad or depressed
- Thoughts or actions concerning suicide or the death of others

# Talking to a Child During Uncertain Times

Even in the seemingly simple world of a child, life can be filled with complexities and uncertainties. Parents need to help their children sort through troubling emotions following events such as widescale protests or social upheaval.

## The Importance of Talking to a Child

Few things in life can prepare us for uncertainty. Children often are hit the hardest during those times, especially if they have never experienced trauma or loss. A range of confusing emotions can surface in a child, and he or she may find it hard to express these feelings or reach out to others for comfort and consolation. Parents and caregivers can create a safe environment for children to talk about these emotions.

Children need to feel comfortable confiding in people who are willing to listen to their concerns. They need to feel understood. They need to let the pain out instead of keeping it inside. They need to be reassured that, although it may take time, things are going to be all right. While it is important to have this kind of support from relatives, friends and others who may have been affected by the same traumatic event, the most vital resource a child has in a time of crisis is his or her parents. Though they may not admit it, children who are suffering need their parents to be willing and available to listen and talk.

## Understanding a Child's Emotions

Experts say that although children may not show much sorrow and pain outwardly, all children mourn when traumatic events occur. Children need to be allowed to express their emotions in their own way, as long as they do not compromise their safety. Many younger children act out their feelings through play and certain behaviors, such as anger, clinginess, irritability or regression (e.g., thumb sucking long after quitting the habit). Older children may vent their emotions by verbally lashing out in anger at the ones they love, listening to aggressive music and isolating themselves in their rooms. These age-appropriate behaviors are considered normal coping mechanisms if they do not last for an extended period of time.

Children also need to be reassured that the traumatic event is not their fault and that they are strong enough to carry on. Many children assume guilt and blame when misfortunes happen. Others build up incredible anger that such catastrophes could happen to them and may direct their anger at loved ones. Although it will be tough, parents need to be honest, consistent, accepting and loving in their approach to handling these issues with their children. Above all, parents should acknowledge that the emotions their children are feeling are absolutely real. Talking to your children about what they are feeling and offering your support will assure them of your understanding of the situation.

## Coping Tips

Use the following tips to help your child and yourself cope with a traumatic event:

- **Find solace in people who understand.** Connect with other families who also may be experiencing a tragedy or a loss. Get involved with a support group. Ask what worked to help their children cope with a trauma.
- **If the traumatic event resulted in the loss of life, commemorate the memory of the deceased.** Attend a memorial service with your child. Honor the deceased by planting a commemorative garden in your backyard or creating a special dedication drawing or painting with your child. Visit the site of the tragedy together, and leave flowers or another loving token or gesture of respect. Returning to the scene of the event may help bring emotions into the open and bring closure to the event.
- **Consider talking to clergy about the spiritual significance of the disaster.** Your child may be able to find a higher meaning in the suffering through religious counsel.
- **Give your child enough time to mourn and heal.** Do not try to rush him or her back into daily activities or ask your child to forget his or her pain too early.



- **When able, make your child feel safe, secure and comfortable by returning to regular family routines.** Children thrive on routines and structure as long as they are not used to ignore or bury unresolved problems.

Do not be afraid to seek professional help to ease your child's mourning, especially if the sadness lingers.

## Warning Signs

Some children have more difficulty than others coping with disaster. Experts say that most children return to a state of normalcy and acceptance within six months of the event. This will, of course, depend on how quickly a family can return to their "normal" life. If you observe the following signs in your child over a prolonged period of time, seek professional help:

- Lack of interest in daily activities
- Denial, when the child pretends that the event has not happened
- Poor grades and declining performance in school
- Frequent bouts of anxiety
- Social withdrawal from friends and family
- Inability to sleep
- Change in eating habits
- Irritability and uneasiness

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Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

## Calming Down After a Disagreement

Disagreements are a natural consequence of human interaction. Put two people in a room, and the odds are they will have different beliefs on at least one issue, if not hundreds. While these interactions often are simple expressions of different opinions, more heated arguments are also common occurrences in everyday life.

### What Can Help

Once an argument is over, many people find it difficult to walk away and get on with their day. There are things you can do to encourage a return to calm after you or someone you know has been involved in a tense or stressful disagreement:

- **Close your eyes and take some deep breaths:** Twenty or 30 deep, cleansing breaths can help return your heart rate to normal and lower your blood pressure after an argument.
- **Vent your frustration constructively:** Exercise is a good way to beneficially expend energy. Take a brisk walk, run or go for an invigorating swim. Meditate or do yoga. Physical chores like moving furniture, carrying groceries or gardening can also help relieve tension and anxiety.
- **Talk to somebody:** Tell somebody about the disagreement you had, and do so in a calm fashion. Share your feelings with your spouse, significant other, a friend or neighbor. They may have suggestions or be able to offer insight from a different point of view than you have previously considered.
- **Move beyond the argument:** The disagreement happened in the past, so why not leave it there? If the argument was a simple difference of opinions, then it should be relatively easy to move beyond. If the argument turned from a difference of opinions into a verbal attack toward you or the other person, start considering how you will address the person in the future.
- **Apologize or reconcile:** The odds are the person you had the argument with (if they are your friend) feels as bad as you do about the disagreement. Make up with them as soon as possible as a way to bring closure to your disagreement and to facilitate moving forward in your life.

### What Can Hinder

The following actions are not useful when trying to deal with the fallout of an argument:

- **Drinking or using illegal substances:** Alcohol and other substances do not help relieve your tension; they just mask the feelings you have.
- **Reliving the disagreement in your mind:** You have already had the experience one time, so there is nothing to gain from reliving it over and over in your head. Try focusing on something else.
- **Having the same argument again with somebody else:** Do not think of an argument as something that can be "won" or "lost." If you walked away from the first argument thinking you "lost," you may feel the need to have it again with somebody else so you can win. But having the same argument more than one time is just a way to compound your anger and frustration. It is not constructive and will lead to you feeling worse, not better.
- **Expressing your feelings in an unconstructive physical manner:** Actions such as punching a wall or an inanimate object will not help you feel better. At best, this will damage property; at worst, it will cause you to hurt yourself.

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