

Information for Helping Children, Teens, and Their Families Cope With War and/or Terrorism

1. Be honest and give age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate explanations about the traumatic event.
 - For young children in particular only provide answers to questions they are asking and do not overwhelm them with too much detail.
 - Use language that young children can understand.
 - It may be easier for young children to express how they are feeling by asking them to talk about what their stuffed animals or dolls are feeling or thinking.
 - Help children and teens to express how they are feeling about what they have seen or heard. If children have difficulty verbally expressing their feelings, ask them to make a drawing about how they are feeling. Older school-age children and teens can benefit from writing about how they feel.
 - Ask children and teens, “What is the scariest or worst thing about this for you?” or “What is worrying you the most?”
2. Do not expose young children to visual images in the newspapers or on television that are potentially terrifying.
3. Reassure children that they did nothing wrong to cause what happened.
 - Toddlers and preschool children especially feel guilty when something tragic happens.
4. Tell children and teens that what they are feeling (e.g., anger, anxiety, helplessness) is normal and that others feel the same way.
5. Alleviate some of their anxiety by reassuring children that you will get through this *together* and will be stronger as a result of what you have been through. Emphasize that adults will be there to help them through this and that they are not alone.
6. Spend some special time with your child every day, even if only 15 minutes.
7. Help children and teens to release their tension by encouraging daily physical exercise and activities.
8. Continue to provide structure to children’s schedules and days.
9. Recognize that war or a tragic event could elevate psychological or physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, abdominal pain or chest pain, nightmares), especially in children and teens who are already depressed or anxious.
 - Remember that young children who are depressed typically have different symptoms (e.g., restlessness, excessive motor activity) from those experienced by older school-age children or teens who are depressed (e.g., sad or withdrawn affect, difficulty sleeping or eating, talking about feeling hopeless).
 - Anger/irritability can be a sign of anxiety in children and teens.

This handout may be distributed to families.

From Melnyk, B. M., & Lusk, P. (2022). *A Practical Guide to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Screening, Evidence-Based Assessment, Intervention, and Health Promotion* (3rd ed.).



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- Children, even teens, who are stressed typically regress (e.g., revert to doing things that they did when they were younger, such as sucking their thumbs, bedwetting, or acting dependent upon their parents). This is a healthy temporary coping strategy. However, if these symptoms persist for several weeks, talk to your healthcare provider about them.
10. Use this opportunity as a time to work with children on their coping skills.
 - Use coping strategies that you know are typically helpful for your child, since each child copes in a way that is best for them (e.g., prayer, doing things to help other people, listening to music).
 11. As a parent, remember that emotions are contagious. If you are highly upset or anxious, there is a good chance that your child also will feel the same way. If you are having difficulty coping with stress or with what is going on in the world around you, it is important to talk with someone who can help you to cope. You being calm will help your child to stay calm.
 12. Be sure to have your child or teen seen by a healthcare provider or mental health professional for signs or symptoms of depression, persistent anxiety, recurrent pain, persistent behavioral changes, or if they have difficulty maintaining routine schedules, or if symptoms are interfering with functioning.
 13. Remember that this can be an opportunity to build future coping and life skills as well as to bring your family unit closer together.

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