

Supporting Your Children in Times of Stress

In times of adversity and turmoil, stress evokes strong emotions and causes uncertainty in all of us. So what can you do to help children cope? Here is a list of useful tips for parents, teachers and caretakers:

Listen.

Some children will want to talk about difficult situations and some won't. Both reactions are common and natural. If they do want to talk, it's important to offer children an opportunity to share their thoughts and questions comfortably. Actively listen to their concerns, attend to their body language, validate their emotions, and encourage respectful conversation and discussions. If they don't feel like talking, don't force the discussions. Continue to check in and let them know you are ready to listen whenever they're ready to talk.



Don't avoid difficult conversations.

Parents and caregivers understandably don't want to cause anxiety and distress in their children. This often results in avoiding difficult conversations that we assume will evoke these emotions. It is the situation itself, though, that is upsetting, not the conversations about it. Invite the conversation with open-ended questions such as: "What would you like to know?" or "How does this make you feel?" Let the child's interests and thoughts guide the conversation.

Acknowledge that we don't have all the answers.

It's alright not to know the answer to every question. If you can't answer your child's question, be honest. Use the opportunity to model yourself as a learner, and explore the question together. Make sure that you don't provide excessive information.

Monitor the TV and internet.

Television programs and social media will cover the news in depth, and may include footage of scenes that are not appropriate for children to view. Similarly, children may use the internet to seek out answers to their questions. Be actively involved in the quality and amount of information they receive, and be prepared to interpret it when necessary.

Be prepared.

Be prepared for your children to ask questions about the circumstances. Be aware of your tone, remaining calm and not appearing anxious. Answer their questions in a way that is honest and age appropriate. Share what is being done to keep them, their family members, and friends safe.

Be aware and sensitive to your children's responses.

Children's responses to difficult situations will vary depending on their age, personality, and exposure to past experiences. There is no right or wrong emotional response to fear or anxiety. Be aware and sensitive to changes in mood, behavior, and daily habits including appetite and sleep patterns (changes are normal for a short period of time). If distress is persistent, worsens or is interfering with daily functioning, talk with their pediatrician or other healthcare/mental health provider.

Take care of yourself.

No one is immune to emotions triggered by hardship. Acknowledge and attend to your own reactions and feelings. Remember that you are your child's best resource, so the best way to help them is to keep yourself safe and healthy. Share with children the strategies you use to cope with your distress. Seek assistance if you are experiencing feelings that are overwhelming or difficult to manage.

Spend time as a family.

The family is the best source of support during difficult situations. In times like these, children need to rely on their parents and siblings. This is an opportunity for the family not only to demonstrate its resilience, but also to strengthen its ties.

Encourage hope.

Although, difficult situations can have negative consequences, they can also have positive outcomes. It is important to keep an optimistic attitude and look forward to the future. People who maintain hope and engage themselves in positive thinking develop resiliency and enhance their chance of coping with the adversity while maintaining their wellbeing.

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