



Disaster symptoms may differ between age groups

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In last week's article we provided information on Disaster Mental Health and services that are available in your local community. This week we will discuss reactions and symptoms to expect in various age groups during a post-disaster event. As stated previously, no one that is witness to a disaster goes untouched by it. Disaster stress and grief reactions are normal responses to abnormal situations.

Each age group can have a different set of symptoms following a disaster event. Infants and young children's reactions are often different from older children. Often they may not be able to put into words how they are feeling about the disaster.

Unfortunately, people at times assume that young children are protected from the impact of disasters. When young children experience or witness a disaster, sometimes adults will say, "They're too young to understand, so it's probably better if we don't talk about it around them." However, young children are affected by traumatic events, even though they may not understand what happened.

The Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addictions recently developed a new "field guide" for Mental Health Responders in the event of a disaster. Here is some of the information presented in the guide for children ages one through five and children ages six through eleven. This guide is used to help educate responders as well as the public on potential disaster reactions in different age groups.

FOR AGES 1 THROUGH 5 Behavioral Symptoms:

- Resumption of bed wetting, thumb sucking, clinging to parents
- Fear of the dark
- Avoidance of sleeping alone
- Increased crying
- Unrealistic/inhibiting fear of event re-occurring

Physical Symptoms:

- Loss of appetite
- Stomach aches
- Nausea
- Sleep problems, nightmares
- Speech difficulties
- Tics

Emotional symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Fear Irritability
- Angry Outbursts
- Sadness
- Withdrawal
- Excessive crying
- Also remember that trauma can result in aggressive behavior.

Suggested interventions with this age group include giving them verbal reassurance and physical comfort; providing comforting bedtime routines; permitting the child to sleep in parents' room temporarily; encouraging expression regarding losses (i.e. deaths, pets, toys) and encouraging expression through play activities.

FOR AGES 6 THROUGH 11 Behavioral Symptoms:

- Decline in school performance
- Aggressive behavior at home and/or school
- Hyperactivity or silly behavior

- Whining, clinging, acting like a younger child
- Increased competition with younger siblings for parents' attention
- Unrealistic/inhibiting fear of event re-occurring

Physical Symptoms:

- Change in appetite
- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares

Emotional Symptoms:

- School avoidance
- Withdrawal from friends, familiar activities
- Angry outbursts
- Obsessive preoccupation with disaster, safety

An intervention suggestion with this age group is to give them attention and consideration; relax your expectations of performance at home at school temporarily; set gentle/firm limits on acting out behaviors; provide structured but undemanding home chores and rehabilitation activities; encourage expression of their thoughts and feeling verbally and through play; and listen to them as they repeat or retell their stories of a disaster event.

Involve them in preparation of family emergency kit, home drills and rehearsal of safety measures.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, parents and caregivers can play a very important role in helping children and adolescents recover from their traumatic experiences.

Resources offered through the National Child Traumatic Stress website



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the National Child Traumatic Stress website will help you learn not only about child traumatic stress but about a child's healthy development and ways to seek help. Visit http://nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=hom_main to learn more.

Next week we will discuss how disasters affect children ages 12 to 18 and adults.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming part of the District Ten Mental Health Team, please feel free to contact me for additional information.

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