

Helping After a Tragedy

When a tragedy strikes, many people who are not directly affected by the events want to help. But they feel a sense of helplessness because they don't know how to offer assistance.

Some emotions you may feel are fear, horror, anger, confusion and frustration. Guilt, self-blame and shame are also common, including survival guilt, guilt over not being able to help others, guilt over things that "could've been done" but weren't, shame over fears or reactions to fears. Loss, grief and sorrow are also felt for the victims and their families. The important thing is to not let these emotions overcome you. Even if you don't live in the areas affected by the tragedies or know anyone involved, there are ways you can help.

Talk to children

According to The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), children may show these behaviors after a disaster:

- change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive or may change from being outgoing to shy and afraid
- develop nighttime fears, have nightmares or bad dreams
- be afraid the event will recur
- become easily upset, crying and whining
- lose trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
- revert to younger behavior such as bed wetting and thumb sucking
- not want parents out of their sight and refuse to go to school or child care
- have symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever

FEMA recommends the following to ease children's fears:

- Talk to children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment.
- Let them take their time to figure things out. Don't rush them.
- Help them use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad or angry.
- Assure them that you will be there to take care of them.
- Stay together as a family as much as possible.
- Let them have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
- Encourage the children to give or send pictures they have drawn or things they have written.
- Help children regain faith in the future by helping them develop plans for activities that will take place later (e.g., next week, next month).
- Allow children to grieve losses.

Listen to friends, co-workers or loved ones who need support

One of the best ways you can help a person is to listen. Encourage someone to talk about his emotions, but don't force him. Expressing experiences and feelings can help ease the tension, making the situation seem lighter to bear. Reassure the person that it's OK to cry. And be respectful if the person requests some private time. But don't assume the person wants to be alone just because he doesn't seek you out first.

Spend time with the person who experienced the trauma. Often you don't even have to say much—just "being there" for them can be as helpful as anything you might be able to say.

Show you care by your words and actions. A comforting hug or a few words of support and encouragement can help. Kind deeds and expressions of affection or admiration will mean a lot.

If you don't know anyone who was hit by the tragedy, it may be helpful to just talk about the events with friends, family, co-workers, a therapist or religious leader. But beware of expressions of violence and anger. It's OK to talk about being angry and hurt, but threatening others with violence will make matters worse and won't reverse the events that occurred.

Other ways you can help

- Pray for the victims and their families.
- Offer specific types of help to a friend or loved one affected by the tragedy, or ask them how you can help.
- Some parents may be very busy. Offer to spend time with their children to play or to listen to their concerns.
- Sometimes people in trauma say or do things they wouldn't do under normal circumstances. So don't take it personally.
- Offer to accompany the individual to any events associated with the trauma (funerals, investigative hearings, court, etc.).
- Keep helping. Recovery from the disaster may take a long time. Regular, small acts of kindness are necessary to help friends and family members rebuild their lives.

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