

# Helping Youth Cope With Fear & Anxiety

Whether tragic events touch your family personally or are brought into your home via newspapers and television, you can help children cope with the anxiety that violence, death and disasters can cause.

The *Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign* offers these pointers for parents and other caregivers:

- **Encourage youth to ask questions.** Listen to what they say. Provide comfort and assurance that address their specific fears. It's okay to admit you can't answer all of their questions.
- **Talk on their level.** Communicate with your youth in a way they can understand. Don't get too technical or complicated.
- **Be honest.** Tell them exactly what has happened. For example, don't say that someone who has died has "gone to sleep;" youth may become afraid of going to bed.
- **Find out what frightens them.** Encourage your youth to talk about fears they may have. They may worry that someone will harm them at school or that someone will try to hurt you.
- **Focus on the positive.** Reinforce the fact that most people are kind and caring. Remind your youth of the heroic actions taken by ordinary people to help victims of tragedy.
- **Pay attention.** Your youth's activities may give you a glimpse into their questions or concerns. Ask them to tell you what is on their mind. It's an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions, answer questions and give reassurance.
- **Develop a plan.** Establish a family emergency plan for the future, such as a meeting place where everyone should gather if something unexpected happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your youth feel safer.

If you are concerned about your youth's reaction to stress or trauma, call your physician or a community mental health center.

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## Age-Specific Interventions

Following exposure to a disaster or traumatic event, children are likely to show signs of stress. Signs include sadness and anxiety, outbursts and tantrums, aggressive behavior, a return to earlier behavior that was outgrown, stomachaches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These reactions are normal and usually do not last long. Whether your child is a preschooler, adolescent, or somewhere in between, you can help your child by following the suggestions below:

### Pre-adolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Be there to listen to your children, but don't force them to talk about feelings and emotions.
- Encourage discussion of trauma experiences among peers.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.
- Urge participation in physical activities.
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

It is important to remember that you do not have to "fix" how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with his or her experiences. Healing is an evolving state for most children, but some may need professional help.

If signs of stress do not subside after a few weeks, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional who has special training in working with children. In time and with help, your children will learn that life does go on.

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Provided by the **Kentucky Community Crisis Response Board**. For more information on Crisis Response and Stress Management programs and services in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, contact KCCRB at (888)-522-7228.