

Age-Specific Reactions and Interventions to a Disaster

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Age-Specific Reaction to disaster and intervention suggestions

Each age group is vulnerable in unique ways to the stresses of disaster. Different issues and concerns become relevant during the progression of phases in the post-disaster period. Some disaster stress reactions listed below may be experienced immediately, while others may appear months later. The following table describes possible disaster reactions of the different age groups and helpful responses to them.

Age-Specific Disaster Reactions				
1-5 years old	6-11	12-18	Adults	Older adults
Resumption of bed-wetting, thumb sucking, clinging to parents	Decline in school performance	Decline in academic performance	Sleep problems	Withdrawal and isolation
Fears of the dark	Aggressive behavior at home or school	Rebellion at home/school	Avoidance of reminders	Reluctance to leave home
Avoidance of sleeping alone	Hyperactive or silly behavior	Decline in previous responsible behavior	Excessive activity level	Mobility limitations
Increased crying	Whining, clinging, acting like a younger child	Decline in previous responsible behavior	Crying easily	Relocation adjustment problems
Loss of appetite	Whining, clinging, acting like a younger child	Agitation or decrease in energy level, apathy	Increased conflicts with family	Worsening of chronic illnesses
Stomach aches	Increased competition with younger siblings for parents' attention	Delinquent behavior	Hypervigilance	Sleep disorders
Nausea	Change in appetite	Social withdrawal	Isolation, withdrawal	Memory problems
Sleep problems, nightmares	Headaches	Appetite changes	Fatigue, exhaustion	Somatic symptoms
Speech difficulties	Stomach aches	Headaches	Gastrointestinal distress	More susceptible to hypo- and hyperthermia
Tics	Sleep disturbances, nightmares	Gastrointestinal problems	Appetite change	Physical and sensory limitations (sight, hearing) interfere with recovery
Anxiety	School avoidance	Skin eruptions	Somatic complaints	Depression
Fear	Withdrawal from friends, familiar activities	Complaints of vague aches and pains	Worsening of chronic conditions	Despair about losses
Irritability	Angry outbursts	Sleep disorders	Depression, sadness	Apathy
Angry outbursts	Obsessive preoccupation with disaster, safety	Loss of interest in peer social activities, hobbies, recreation	Irritability, anger	Confusion, disorientation
Sadness		Sadness or depression	Anxiety, fear	Suspicion
Withdrawal		Resistance to authority	Despair, hopelessness	Agitation, anger
		Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness	Guilt, self doubt	Fears of institutionalization
			Mood swings	Anxiety with unfamiliar surroundings

Age-Specific Intervention Suggestions

1-5 years old	6-11	12-18	Adults	Older adults
Give verbal assurance and physical comfort	Give additional attention and consideration	Give additional attention and consideration	Provide supportive listening and opportunity to talk in detail about disaster experiences	Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance
Provide comforting bedtime routines	Temporarily relax expectations of performance at home and at school	Temporarily relax expectations of performance at home and school	Assist with prioritizing and problem-solving	Provide orienting information
Avoid unnecessary separations	Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior	Encourage discussion of disaster experiences with peers, significant adults	Offer assistance for family members to facilitate communication and effective functioning	Use multiple assessment methods as problems may be under reported
Permit the child to sleep in parents' room temporarily	Provide structured but undemanding home chores and rehabilitation activities	Avoid insistence on discussion of feelings with parents	Assess and refer when indicated	Provide assistance with recovery of possessions
Encourage expression regarding losses (i.e., deaths, pets, toys)	Encourage verbal and play expression of thoughts and feelings	Encourage physical activities	Provide information on disaster stress and coping, children's reactions and families	Assist in obtaining medical and financial assistance
Monitor media exposure to disaster trauma	Listen to the child's repeated retelling of a disaster event	Rehearse family safety measures for future disasters	Provide information on referral resources	Assist in reestablishing familial and social contacts
Encourage expression through play activities	Involve the child in preparation of family emergency kit, home drills	Encourage resumption of social activities, athletics, clubs etc.		Give special attention to suitable residential relocation
	Rehearse safety measures for future disasters	Encourage participation in community rehabilitation and reclamation work		Encourage discussion of disaster losses and expression of emotions
	Coordinate school disaster program for peer support, expressive activities, education on disasters, preparedness planning, identifying at-risk children	Coordinate school programs for peer support and debriefing, preparedness planning, volunteer community recovery, identifying at-risk teens		Provide and facilitate referrals for disaster assistance

(SAMHSA Field Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Working in Major Disasters)