

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH A TRAUMATIC EVENT

» Introduction

Being exposed to traumatic events such as the horrifying explosion in Beirut can lead to several distress reactions in children. Even those not directly affected by the disaster can become traumatized when repeatedly exposed to horrific images of the event on the news or social media.

Whether the child lived through the traumatic event itself, or witnessed it, or experienced traumatic stress in the aftermath, they are likely to be affected by a range of emotions. These reactions are normal and usually decrease within a few days.

» Normal reactions

Children respond to stress and trauma in different ways such as being more clingy, anxious, withdrawing, angry or agitated, etc.

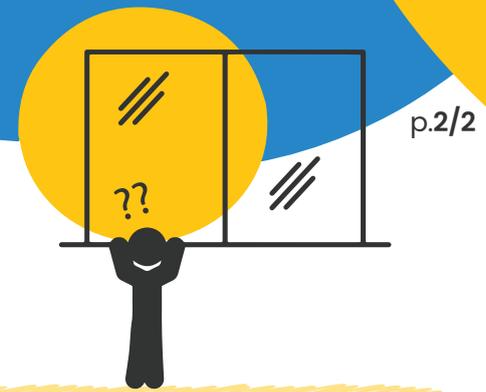
Children need support and reassurance to find ways to cope through this traumatic time.

» How can you support if you are a relief worker

- || Identify children, adolescents, and families in need of urgent and immediate medical or mental health services.
- || Stay with children and adolescents who are experiencing acute distress and try to calm them. Signs of acute distress include trembling, rambling, becoming mute, or exhibiting erratic behaviour.
- || Protect children and adolescents from physical danger, exposure to additional traumatic sights and sounds and the media.
- || Direct children and adolescents away from the event site.
- || Connect children and adolescents with family and friends.
- || When communicating, you can reduce fear and anxiety by actively listening

» Compassionate communication

- || When interacting with –or especially, speaking with – children, make sure you are on eye level with them and make regular eye contact with them.
- || Clearly introduce yourself, your name and role.
- || Communicate calmly, slowly, and with empathy.
- || Be honest of what you don't know.
- || Be factual, provide reliable information that you might have.
- || Be patient and calm. Use a soft tone of voice.
- || Acknowledge and be tolerant of strong emotions and behaviours.



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» How can parents support their children

Adults' reactions to trauma influence how children respond and react. Parents can help children by being supportive, listening to their concerns, remaining calm, giving them extra love and attention.

What to do

- + Allow children to be sad or cry; help them understand that it is a normal reaction, and that there are no bad emotions
- + Listen to children, speak kindly and reassure them
- + Answer questions about the event honestly and at a level the child can understand
- + Provide ongoing opportunities for children to express emotions through conversation, writing, or drawing pictures
- + Limit viewing the news reports about the traumatic event
- + Give extra attention to children who have trouble sleeping
- + Try to maintain usual routines and make opportunities for the child to play and relax

What not to do

- Don't expect or demand children to be brave or tough
- Don't get angry if children show strong emotions
- Don't dwell on frightening details and don't be afraid to admit that you cannot answer all of their questions
- Don't force children to talk about or discuss the event before they are ready
- Don't watch, listen to or discuss upsetting news when children are around
- Don't get upset if children are not able to sleep or are bed-wetting or thumb-sucking
- Don't ignore severe reactions

Help children identify good and positive things, such as the assistance offered by the community, families who unite and share support, etc.

» Pay attention to sudden changes in behaviours, speech, or strong emotions

Contact a health care provider if you notice a new behaviour or emotional problems, especially if these symptoms occur for more than a few weeks:

- || Having flashbacks of what happened or nightmares
- || Being easily startled, on guard or jumpy
- || Bedwetting
- || Being emotionally numb
- || A racing heart and sweating
- || Being very sad or depressed

Acknowledge that you could also have reactions associated with the traumatic event. Take steps to take care of yourself and promote your own physical and emotional healing.