

Tips for talking with and helping children and young people cope after tragic events

Distressing events like tragic accidents in your local area, or that took place in familiar places like a popular holiday location, or even disasters that happen far away, but are covered by the media, can be powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

This resource sheet includes some helpful tips for parents, caregivers and teachers for helping children and young people to cope following local, national, or even world tragedies.



Guidelines for parents, caregivers and teachers

Distressing events like tragic accidents in your local area, or that took place in familiar places like a popular holiday location, or even disasters that happen far away, but are covered by the media, can be powerful and upsetting incidents that intrude into daily life.

Many people can have strong emotional or physical reactions like sorrow, anger, confusion, or even fear in the aftermath of tragedy. Whilst they may not have experienced the incident first hand, these emotional reactions can be sadness for the people who lost their lives or lost loved ones, as well as a response to other types of losses. They may experience the loss of their sense of safety, their trust in the 'people in charge', or the government and authorities, or the event might trigger feelings around a personal experience of loss or grief.

For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the feelings and reactions may last longer and be more severe. Even following such events from a distance in the media can be distressing. Indeed, the way the media portray these events can make them seem even more overwhelming or distressing.

What can parents, caregivers and teachers do?

Talk about the events

Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the events. Let them know that talking about it can be a good thing.

Parents, carers and teachers of school aged children may need to open the conversation about the event and its aftermath. Say things like "As you know, there was an [accident in PLACE XYZ]. Many people were killed or injured. I want to talk with you about this and answer any questions or worries you may have".

It is not necessary to share gruesome details of the event, but do provide truthful but simple information that will help them to separate fact from fiction and clear up any misinformation about what happened. Expect that children might ask the same questions over and over as they attempt to make sense of events.

Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings

Help children and young people to put words to feelings.

Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them. They may talk about it in their own time or after a few days rather than the first time you have a conversation, so try to be open to this.

Let them know that crying is fine when they need to.



Monitor media exposure

Children can become distressed and fearful after watching repeated images of frightening events on the television, as well as other forms of media, and can come to believe that the world is a scary place.

Adults can shield young children from traumatic events by not letting them see or hear media reports or overhear adult conversations about the events.

If older children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them. They need your adult presence and perspective. Being able to talk about the material with a caring and reassuring adult can greatly reduce these reactions. These events and reactions will likely be depicted through social media, which can be more difficult for parents to monitor. It is important to prepare young people for this exposure (including other people's reactions to it) and to monitor social media use as well as reinforce the above messages.

Engage in age-appropriate honest discussions

By their very nature, tragedies are especially difficult to explain, and it can be very challenging to understand 'unthinkable' events. It is normal for children (and adults) to seek an explanation of why a tragedy occurred. By understanding, we are often trying to reassure ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future, so be prepared for 'why' questions. Uncertainty is particularly distressing, so these questions can be hard, but children need our best answers.

Children need honest, thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of the event, but they might also need our support to help them reconcile the uncertainties. You could say things like, 'We don't know yet how this [accident] happened. Sometimes things break/go wrong/people make mistakes in ways that nobody was expecting. These events are extremely rare, but very scary and sad for the people involved'. This acknowledges the severity of the event, but also reassures them that it is an unlikely event.

When people are upset, they often look for someone to blame, so be prepared for blaming. Anger and blame are often covering up underlying fears (or sadness) and blame can be a way of coping 'e.g., If someone did something *wrong*, then maybe future tragedies can be avoided by doing things *right*'. If the discussion gets stuck with blaming, you could try to help children separate angry thoughts and feelings from fearful thoughts and feelings. You could say something like, 'It's not uncommon to feel anger or to want to blame someone, but I'm wondering if this [tragic event] has also brought up other feelings like being sad or scared?'



Look out for possible stress reactions

Look out for changes in children's usual behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed. This may include difficulty sleeping, being more clingy than usual, or changes in appetite. There may also be problems with attention and concentration, an increase in irritability and mood swings, or being more withdrawn than usual.

Exercise, eating healthy meals, and plenty of rest are all helpful.

Encourage children to do the things they used to enjoy doing, and to play and laugh.

Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of attention and affection. Let them be more dependent on you for a while.

Maintain good routines – predictable activity at home and school is very reassuring for children and young people.

Recognise safety and security needs and reassure children

People often have heightened concerns about their own safety after tragedy.

Talk to children and young people about the helpers and the heroes that help to make the world a better place.

Let children know that there are many people across the country working hard to make sure that people stay as safe as possible before, during and after any emergency, disaster or traumatic event and that these people are very good at their job.

Reassure children and let them know that they are safe and are being looked after, and that nothing bad will happen to them personally.

Make this an opportunity to discuss family or school plans for safety in the event of an emergency.

Foster hope

In the aftermath of tragic events we can also be reminded of the goodness of people.

Leave children with a sense of security but also hope, and help them to see that their world is basically a safe place, people are usually good, and that life is worth living.

Help them to see that there can be positive changes that come from distressing or tragic events, for example:

- Increasing people's desire to help more and show acts of kindness to others in their community or in other parts of the world.
- Having increased appreciation for relationships and loved ones.
- Becoming allies to other people who might be in need of support.



Help children find something positive to do in response to distressing world events, so they feel they can make a positive difference in the world, like:

- Volunteering in the community to help others.
- Donating money that they have personally earned to Red Cross or other emergency organisations.
- Writing thank you notes to the organisations that helped following the event.

Pay attention to your own reactions

Children may respond to the anxieties felt and expressed by the people around them. They often see and hear far more than adults are aware of, and they will take their cues for how to respond from you.

Talk privately with trusted adults if you are needing to air your own feelings or explore your own reactions to the events.

Share your own feelings, but show that you are in control of them.

Pay attention to your own reactions and model good coping skills for dealing with distressing and confusing events.

Seeking professional assistance

Talking with a psychologist may be helpful if you feel you need further assistance with communication techniques that will assist you in discussing important issues. Your APS psychologist has at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and efficient service.

For more information about the APS disaster recovery resources please visit psychology.org.au/topics/disasters/