

Tips for Helping Children During and After Harvey

Children are prone to anxieties and stress just as adults are but given their developmental stages, they are often less able to express their thoughts and feelings and thus changes in behavior are often the first signs that your child may be anxious or stressed. Here are a few ways you as the parent or adult can help children who may be anxious or fearful regarding Harvey and its aftermath:

1. Keep a schedule and structure as best you can. Children do best with predictability. Maintain normalcy, if you've been displaced, maintain as best as you can your bedtime rituals, eating schedules and rituals etc. (i.e. if you read or sing before bed or if your family always prays before meals...continue those actions as they provide normalcy for children). Send children back to school as soon as possible. School is their normal and it allows you to take care of a lot of the hard stuff while they are there.
2. Limit the exposure to the news coverage and media. I know the anxiety as an adult one can feel from the constant barrage in the media, limit your child's exposure. Children do not have the same ability as adults do to understand what they see on television is not right outside their door persay. They can not separate time and distance like adults are able to do.
3. Be reassuring and encouraging but don't lie about your circumstance. Explain to children on their level what is happening and the plan. Children do best with preview, e.g. our house got water inside so we have to stay with family while we fix it. Even if you were evacuated and displaced, there are positives to be found in that the family is safe and dry now and the rain will stop and the water will go away.
4. Even in times of stress, point out that there are always helpers and help children look for the helpers and/or be helpers to others.
5. Expect triggers such as rain storms to cause anxiety and worry for a period of time. Again use reassurance that this is just normal rain and no water will get in our house etc.
6. Seek professional help as needed.

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As we all pull together to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, Premier would like to offer the following guidelines to help children cope with this event. Remember, people do not need to have been directly impacted by the storm to have been affected. Here are some ways that you can help children:

- **Be attentive:** Children do not always communicate their thoughts and feelings directly. Pay attention to other ways that they communicate. Look for changes in sleep, appetite, and/or school performance. Is your child being more “clingy”? More distant? Are they more irritable or fearful (particularly when the weather is bad)? All of these things can be signs of traumatic stress. Young children often communicate through play. Get on the floor with them--look for themes in play to help learn what they may be thinking or feeling. Also, do not be afraid to ask children how they are doing. Often, they are waiting for a signal from you that it is "ok" to talk about feelings like fear, sadness, and grief.
- **Be consistent:** Children thrive with routine. Routines can be particularly important in times of stress. If you are displaced, try to incorporate as much normalcy as you can in your new environment. Try to adhere to a consistent schedule (e.g., bedtime routine, meal time routine). Even if material possessions are lost, children can be comforted greatly by things such as a favorite bed time story, a trip to a favorite play place, or hearing an oft repeated family story.
- **Be productive:** Many of us feel the need to do something to help. Children are no exception. Look for ways that they can help others who may have greater needs. While they may not be able to volunteer, young children can draw pictures, write letters, or pick out a special toy for a child in need.
- **Be inspirational:** Highlight stories of goodness. Help children understand that there is good even in times of bad. Share with them stories of communities coming together and helping one another. Spread some good news!
- **Be attentive to self:** Remember, parents are children's first and best teachers. With that in mind, take care of yourself, so that you can care for your child. Be sure to get support for your needs. Children will watch what you do and will take cues from you. Be healthy, so that they can be healthy.
- **Be fun:** Even in hard times, everyone needs a release, children are no exception. Remember to take a stress break. Turn off news coverage in favor of a family movie or cartoon. Take a trip to get ice cream. Play charades. Taking time to have fun is important to recovery and can be a great way to relieve stress.
- **Be in touch with providers:** If you feel as if you or your children are having trouble coping, reach out for help. There is no shame in needing assistance. Teachers, pediatricians, family doctors, and mental health providers are there to help you--use them!

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Ideas to use to help your child during this traumatic event:

1. Reassuring a child can be as simple as a touch - hug them, smile as you stroke their hair. Allow them to follow you room to room if frightened to see that although something scary has happened - they are safe "now" and we will work on any problems together.
2. Take time to play games, watch movies or do creative activities to both pass time and make good memories during the time of stress.
3. Talk about what matters most (Your family's values and ethics and faith) and role model this as you pray together, help others in crises, etc.
4. Educate them concerning things they are witnessing or hearing that are foreign to them. Explain what the rescue helpers are doing and what the television news pictures are all about - how they help folks know where not to travel at this time as it is unsafe and where to go for help if needed (shelters, medical supplies, etc)
5. Teach safety first from a responsibility perspective without frightening them. Share smart things to do and things that aren't not smart to do when in danger. Make it a game where they can guess the right and wrong answers. This helps empower the child to focus on choices that can make them feel safer and calmer in crises.
6. If they have lost someone they love, consider getting some professional help to ensure they are in track in grieving the loss without getting stuck in perpetual fear - so they are not reliving the trauma but rather fully processing it and getting the support they need to be resilient.

Information and Resources for Parents to Help Their Children Cope and Recover After Hurricane Harvey

The effects of Hurricane Harvey on child or adolescent functioning can be varied, with some children exhibiting increased anxiety and concerns, while others may display behavioral outbursts and reactions, or children may experience a mixture of emotional and behavioral reactions. Children or adolescents with pre-existing emotional and behavioral problems may show worsened symptoms during this time. Parents and caretakers may observe and monitor their child's symptoms and seek professional help if they have concerns about their child's recovery. Guidelines and common symptoms in children and adolescents are provided below as well as tips for how parents can help their child cope and recover after the disaster.

Common reactions seen in children and adolescents:

Some common anxieties in children following the storm may include increased concerns about separation from their family members, worries about the safety of loved ones, feelings of insecurity, worries about the future, or fear of another hurricane hitting again. Children may also display behavioral reactions such as disruptive behaviors, irritability, aggression, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, agitation, difficulty with sleeping, changes in appetite, lack of interest in usual activities, increased sensitivity to sounds like thunder or wind, and may become focused on the hurricane and talk repeatedly about it or re-enact the event through play. Adolescents may show different reactions than younger children and may engage in increased risk-taking behaviors, become socially withdrawn, angry, or irritable, and may exhibit conflict with authority.

Helpful Tips for Parents:

Parents and caretakers can help their child or adolescent by spending time answering any questions and validating concerns, modelling calm behaviors, providing reassurance of safety to their children, maintain routines, follow regular family expectations for behaviors, limit media exposure, communicate to their child about community recovery, encourage children to help, reduce boredom, be patient, keep things hopeful, and seek professional help if children have difficulties for more than six weeks post-hurricane. Parents are also encouraged to engage in self-care and take a break when needed, place a hold on major life-changing decisions, listen and support each other.

Reference:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *Natural Disasters (Hurricanes)*. Retrieved August 30, 2017, from <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters/hurricanes>

Resources for parents:

<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters/hurricanes>

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/parents_guidelines_talk_children_hurricanes.pdf

Tips for parents on media coverage:

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/media_coverage_hurricane_parents.pdf

Story Book to help young children and families to talk about feelings and concerns after experiencing a hurricane:

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trinka_and_sam_final.pdf

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Our city has gone through a lot of trauma the last few days due to Hurricane Harvey. This trauma is experienced by families, and results in changes. These changes can be changes in where we live, our ability to provide for our family, and other stable factors that were present prior to Hurricane Harvey.

Anxiety is a real part of this trauma and change, that is experienced by adults, and even more so by children. For adults and children experiencing anxiety due to the trauma, and changes that have occurred, we wanted to provide you with a couple of things that can help decreasing the anxiety that some may be experiencing.

The first is to help your body relax by taking a deep breath, and slowly releasing the breath. Do this several times until you feel your body relaxing. You can do this anytime you begin to feel your body becoming more anxious. You can help your child take these deep breaths, and have them pretend to blow all of their worries away. This will help both of you relax, and provide a way for your child (ren) to visualize all of the things they are worried about being blown away when they exhale. This helps provide them with a sense of control and eases the anxiety, which will help decrease some of their anxiety as well.

The second would be to sit down, close your eyes, and imagine a place that is relaxing to you. Really focus on this place and imagine being in this place, and experiencing the relaxation that comes with being there. Parents can help your child (ren) by talking them, through this exercise, instructing them to close their eyes, think of a place they enjoy (you can ask them what their favorite place is before you start this exercise), and have them imagine they are there. Help them talk about things they would do there, and how they feel when they are there to help with their focus during this exercise.

These are just a couple of things that you can do to help with easing some of the anxiety that comes with changes and trauma.



HELPING CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

A catastrophe such as a flood is frightening to children and adults alike. It is important to acknowledge the frightening parts of the disaster when talking with a child about it. Falsely minimizing the danger will not end a child's concerns. Several factors affect a child's response to disaster.

The way children see and understand their parents' response is very important. Children are aware of their parents' worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive during a crisis. Parents should admit their concerns to their children, and also stress their abilities to cope with the situation.

A child's reaction also depends on how much destruction he or she sees during and after the disaster. If a friend or family member has been killed or seriously

injured, or if the child's school or home has been severely damaged, there is a greater chance that the child will experience difficulties.

A child's age affects how the child will respond to the disaster. For example, six-year-olds may show their concerns about a catastrophe by refusing to attend school, whereas adolescents may minimize their concerns but argue more with parents and show a decline in school performance. It is important to explain the event in words the child can understand.

Following a disaster, people may develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is psychological damage that can result from experiencing, witnessing or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic (frightening) event.

Children with this disorder have repeated episodes in which they re-experience the traumatic event. Children often relive the trauma through repetitive play.

In young children, distressing dreams of the traumatic event may change into nightmares of monsters, of rescuing others or of threats to self or others.

PTSD rarely appears during the trauma itself. Though its symptoms can occur soon after the event, the disorder often surfaces several months or even years later.

Parents should be alert to these changes:

- **Refusal to return to school** and "clinging" behavior, shadowing the mother or father around the house;
- **Persistent fears** related to the catastrophe (such as fears about being permanently separated from parents);
- **Sleep disturbances** such as nightmares, screaming during sleep and bedwetting, persisting more than several days after the event;
- **Loss of concentration** and irritability;
- **Behavior problems** - for example, misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical for the child;
- **Physical complaints** (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found;
- **Withdrawal from family** and friends, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with the events of the disaster.

Professional advice or treatment for children affected by a disaster—especially those who have witnessed destruction,

injury or death—can help prevent or minimize PTSD.

Parents who are concerned about their children can ask their pediatrician or family doctor or **contact Mental Health America of Greater Houston's partner, United Way of Greater Houston** for help identifying a mental health professional.

For help, information, or referrals,

Dial 2-1-1

211 HELPLINE at United Way

2-1-1 is the number to call when you don't know who to call. Trained HELPLINE specialists are good listeners, blending understanding and expertise to provide information and referrals drawn from a comprehensive database of social services.



Mental Health America of Greater Houston, the area's oldest mental health education and advocacy organization, has been a proud United Way Agency shaping and responding to the mental health needs communities and all people since 1958.

www.mhahouston.org

Coping With Disaster

A disaster of any size will cause unusual stress in people who have been directly and indirectly impacted by it.

Each person will react differently and a range of responses to a disaster are normal and to be expected.

Emotional responses to disasters can appear immediately or sometimes months later. Understanding what you're feeling and taking positive steps can help you cope with this disaster.

Here are some common responses to disasters:

- Responses to Disaster
- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation, apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless



- Extreme hunger or lack of appetite
- Difficulty making decisions
- Crying for “no apparent reason”
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive drinking or drug use

Most of these reactions will decrease as time passes and you focus attention on daily activities. Everyone experiences stress differently, don't compare your progress with others around you or judge other people's reactions and emotions.

What You Can Do

- **Talk about it.** Not expressing your feelings will keep you from being able to work through what happened. By talking with others, you will relieve stress and realize that other people share your feelings.
- **Get plenty of rest and exercise.** Remember to eat well. Avoid excessive drinking and risk-taking activities.
- **Spend time with your family.** If you have any children, encourage them to discuss their concerns and feelings with you.
- **As soon as it feels comfortable,** go back to your usual routine.
- **Do things that you find relaxing** and soothing.
- **Recall other times** you have experienced strong emotions and how they were resolved.
- **Do something positive** that will help you gain a greater sense of control (for example, donate food or clothing).

If you feel overwhelmed by the disaster, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness.

Talk with a trusted relative, friend, social worker, or clergy/faith community member.

People who have existing mental health problems and those who have survived past

trauma may also want to check in with a mental health care professional.

Being unable to manage your responses to the disaster and resume your regular activities may be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a real and treatable illness.

If you have strong feelings that won't go away or if you are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help or contact Mental Health America of Greater Houston's partner, United Way of Greater Houston for help identifying a mental health professional.

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Self Care Strategies for Children

Houston has been severely impacted by Hurricane Harvey and as we continue to rebuild our city, we may find ourselves looking outwards at the good (e.g., helpers, volunteers, community, etc.) and the bad (e.g., flood homes, deaths, loss, fear, etc.), but we may forget to look INWARDS for self-care and monitoring how we are coping with this traumatic event. It is equally as important to support children and adolescents to process and cope with this natural disaster. The effects of this traumatic event on child and/or adolescent functioning can be varied with possible increased emotional, behavioral, and psychological dysregulation. Parents, caretakers, teachers, etc. should observe and monitor their child's symptoms and seek professional help if they have concerns about their child's recovery. Some suggestions to support your child are listed below. Adjust to their developmental level:

- Coping skills. Adapt/ develop coping skills to your child's current situation. Examples include thinking of their favorite place/ thing to do/ memory, drawing their feelings, deep breaths, etc.
- Be available. Listen. Play. Children seek reassurance, affection, and attention from their loved ones. Children still need to be children and play is their method of communication. You may find they process the hurricane through their play and drawings.
- Maintain the normal schedule/ routine to the best of your ability. Children do best with structure and predictability.
- Check-in and follow-up, particularly with adolescents. Set aside some time to do a mental health check-in and let them know you are available to talk to them about the storm/ anything, if it comes up later. If nothing comes up, then use that time to catch up.
- Set expectations in advance. Provide a "preview" of what's to come, whether it's an hour in advance or a day in advance. Writing it down on a sheet of paper and providing verbal reminders may be helpful for children to anticipate changes (e.g., Today, grandparent's house, tomorrow, Aunt Suzy's house; or first we're going to have visitors fix the house, then we'll have lunch).
- Validate, don't negate. Children may be feeling all sorts of mixed, intense emotions. They are REAL to the child and we can support them with statements such as, "That's a big feeling; That does sound frustrating; Yes, sounds like all those worries are very scary. It's really sad that our home got flooded."
- Limit media exposure. If they've caught sight or heard devastating news coverage, invite them to process and talk about it.
- Have hope. Focus on helpers in your community; find a way to help/ volunteer (e.g., passing out water, writing cards, donating blankets/ toiletries, packing snack bags, etc.). Encourage and reassure with honesty about your circumstance (e.g., I'm not sure when we will go back to our house, but we are safe and the rain has/will stop and the water will go away).
- Self-care for parents/ caretakers. Making sure you are cared for allows you to care for your child.
- Anticipate triggers (e.g., sound of water, rain, puddles, storms, helicopters, etc.) to cause anxiety and fear for some time. Validate, and encourage and reassure the reality (e.g., It's raining and it scared you because it reminded you of the storm we were in. It will eventually stop and I am here).
- Social stories may be beneficial for children on the Autism Spectrum or those with developmental delays and/or sensory processing disorders.
- Seek professional help if you or your child is struggling to cope.

Additional resources:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <http://www.nctsn.org/content/help-kids-cope>

Daniel Tiger: A Storm in the Neighborhood.

http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/dtn/episodes/213a_storm_in_neighborhood/index.html