

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

HELPING CHILDREN MANAGE EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS AFTER MASS VIOLENCE

Just like natural disasters, mass violence causes lasting harm to survivors, communities and even people in other areas. Extreme violence can bring about a range of emotions for children who are directly exposed to it. Everyone who is exposed can have more severe traumatic stress reactions, and these reactions can last longer than other traumas.

Common reactions and emotions

Children's behaviors may change after the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating on schoolwork or home responsibilities, changes in appetite, and changes in mood.

However, those who were injured, have experienced prior trauma or lost someone they knew may have more intense and longer-lasting reactions. It's different for each child and depends on their physical and emotional health, coping styles, culture, family supports, and life experiences.

Children and teens often don't know how to express their feelings of anger or fear. Be on the lookout for these signs of distress:

- Feeling physically and mentally drained, with low or no energy
- Having unexplained aches and pains, such as constant stomach- or headaches
- Having difficulty making decisions or staying focused
- Becoming easily and more frequently frustrated
- Arguing with family and friends more often, or pulling away from people and withdrawing
- Becoming disinterested in things they used to enjoy
- Feeling tired, sad, numb, lonely or worried
- Experiencing changes in appetite or sleep
- Worrying a lot of the time
- Feeling guilty but not sure why

For older children, you may notice them smoking, drinking or using drugs (including prescription medications).

Support for children

You may be struggling with how to talk with children about an incident of mass violence. It is important to remember that children look to adults to make them feel safe. This is true no matter what age they are, be they toddlers, adolescents, or even young adults. Consider the following tips to help them manage their distress.

- **Talk to them.** What you talk about and how you say it depends on your child's age, but they all need to know you are ready to listen.
- **Monitor adult conversations.** Be aware that children may be listening to your conversations. If they do not understand, they will fill in the gaps, which can increase anxiety.



- **Gently correct inaccurate information.**
 - Start by asking what your child has heard about the events from the media or friends.
 - Listen carefully and try to figure out what they know or believe.
 - Listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns.
 - If your child has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age- appropriate language.
- **Keep home a safe place.** Regardless of their age, children sometimes feel home is a safe haven when they are overwhelmed by the world around them. During times of crisis, it is important to remember that your children may come home seeking the safe feeling they have being there, even if your neighborhood may not be completely safe. Consider planning a night where everyone participates in safety planning and what to do if violence erupts.
- **Watch for red flags.** Look for regressed behaviors like clinging. Pay attention to statements like “I’d rather be dead” or “the world would be better off without me.”
- **Take news breaks.** Your children may want to stay informed by gathering information about the event from the internet, television or newspapers. Limit their screen and reading time and check their browsing history. Constant exposure may heighten their anxiety and fears.
- **Be a positive role model.** Consider sharing your feelings about the events with your child, but at a level they can understand. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims and their families. You may share some worry, but it is important to also share how you cope with events like this.
- **Teach your child about resilience.** Talk to them about what is in their control, like not eating junk food, going to bed on time and brushing their teeth. Help them

understand what isn’t in their control. Remind them of a difficult time they got through in the past. And tell them that even though they might never feel the same, they will feel better over time.

Professional help

If your child was present during the incident or knew any of the people who were injured or killed, they may be at higher risk for more serious or longer lasting problems. If your child or teen is not able to manage their emotions or function well, seek help.

There are competent and caring professionals available who can effectively treat the most common responses to mass violence, like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complicated grief. The most effective treatments will help your child or teen:

- Mourn and make sense of what happened
- Process intense emotions or numbness
- Solve problems they may be encountering
- Build resilience and coping skills

The sooner your child gets help, the sooner they will feel better.

National resources

American Red Cross: redcross.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 or samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline

VictimConnect Resource Center: 1-855-4-VICTIM or victimconnect.org/get-help

**EAP is here to provide you with compassionate and caring support.
Go online to eap.calhr.ca.gov or call 1-866-327-4762 to get started.**