

Helping Kids Cope with Trauma and Loss Reminders After a Natural Disaster: A Guide for Caregivers

The months and years after a natural disaster can continue to be challenging for children and teens, especially for those who were directly affected. Over time, most young people will adjust to their “new normal” and go on to lead healthy, happy lives. However, it is important for caregivers to be aware of potential “trauma or loss reminders” that kids may encounter along the way. These reminders can surface both soon after the event and even years later. By recognizing them, adults can be ready to offer understanding and support when needed most.

What Are Trauma Reminders?

Trauma reminders are people, places, sounds, smells, or situations that remind the child of the traumatic event. In the case of a flood, these can include weather-related events (rain, storms), certain places (the river or other bodies of water), dates (July 4th), sounds (rushing water), people who were there at the time of the flood, as well as stories in the media. When kids face trauma reminders, they are more likely to experience traumatic stress reactions, including increased heart rate, trembling, shaking, intense fear, crying, and in some more serious cases, dissociation (feeling like they are in another world or frozen). If a child is experiencing any of these reactions, caregivers can do the following to help their child to cope:

1. Explain what is happening and why they might be reacting this way. Kids may be confused about the reaction they're having, especially when a lot of time has gone by, so explaining what is happening can be reassuring. For example, you might say: “I know a storm can feel scary because it reminds you of what you went through during the flood. It's normal to feel scared when you're reminded of that, but remember that you are out of that situation now and you're perfectly safe. Here are the things we are doing to make sure we stay safe during the storm....”

2. Keep the lines of communication open. Although your child may not want to talk about what they're thinking or feeling in that moment, keeping an open-door policy is important. That will make it more likely for them to turn to you when they do feel more comfortable talking about it. For example, you might say: “I know it's hard to talk about this right now. I just want you to know that I'm here for you whenever you need me.”

3. Encourage healthy coping skills. These can include deep breathing exercises or grounding exercises (e.g., think of a color and find 3 things around the room of that color) that can help them to calm down. When kids are faced with trauma reminders, it can also be helpful to call upon the healthy coping skills they may already be using in everyday situations. For example, you might say: “I know you like to listen to music when you're feeling stressed. Is that something you might want to do right now?” Or “Getting exercise usually takes your mind off of stressful things. Would you want to go for a walk?”

4. Encourage social support. When children and teens have been through a traumatic experience, it is often helpful for them to be around others who have had the same experience. This allows them to express concerns they may have, which may be more difficult to discuss with others who weren't in the same situation. It also helps to normalize many of the reactions they may be having to trauma reminders.

What are Loss Reminders?

Loss reminders are people, places, things, or situations that remind the child of the physical absence of the person who died. These can include the person's favorite places, people who resemble the person who died, seeing images of the person, things they used to do together, etc. When kids face loss reminders, they are likely to experience feelings of sadness, yearning and longing to be back with the person who died, and wishing they could see them again. If a child is experiencing any of these reactions, caregivers can do the following to help the child to cope:

1. Meet children where they are. Children who have experienced the death of a loved one can express a wide range of reactions in response to loss reminders. Some want to talk a lot about the death, and others may not want to talk at all. It can be helpful for caregivers to 1) answer your child's questions about the death when they are ready; 2) validate their concerns and emotions; and 3) be fully present when they need you. For example, you might say, "I didn't know you were feeling this way. I'm happy you felt comfortable sharing that with me, and I'm so proud that you did." Or "I know how difficult this experience has been for you, and I promise to do my best to be there for you."

2. Provide opportunities to memorialize and connect to their loved one who died. Sharing stories about the person, looking at pictures, or doing an activity to honor their memory, are wonderful ways for children and teens to express their feelings and feel connected to the person who died. For example, you might say: "Is there anything you would like to do on (the day _____ died/ their birthday/special holidays?) to help remember them?"

3. Take care of yourself. Parents are often so worried about caring for their children after a death that they forget to care for themselves. As a parent or other caregiver, you are an instrumental part of helping your child grieve in helpful ways. Getting the care you may need is just as critical as caring for your child. Not only will it help to ensure that you will be ready and able to support your child, but it is also an opportunity for you to model good self-care—including asking for help if you need it.

As time passes, many in the community may still be affected by their experiences. Recognizing and helping kids to prepare for potential trauma and loss reminders can be helpful in reducing their distress. For further information or resources about how to help youth to cope in the aftermath of a trauma, please visit the Trauma and Grief Center website: www.tagcenter.org

These guidelines were developed by the Trauma and Grief Center at the Meadows Institute. For more information, please contact:

Marisa Nowitz, MSW, LCSW-S, Vice President of Education and Training
Trauma and Grief Center, The Hackett Center for Mental Health, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute
mnowitz@mmhpi.org

Julie Kaplow, PhD, ABPP, Executive Director, Trauma and Grief Center, The Hackett Center for Mental Health,
Executive Vice President, Trauma and Grief Programs and Policy, Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute
jkaplow@mmhpi.org