

The Effects after a Stressful Event and Helping Children Cope

In the event of an unexpected event where we as humans feel powerless and unprepared our responses can be intense and varied. The event can be a onetime event such as an accident, a natural disaster or violent attack, or it can be an ongoing threat to life or safety.

Sometimes the responses can appear immediately after the event, or a few hours or a few days later.

Any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can cause responses even if it doesn't involve direct physical harm.

These responses are part of an automatic system that all animals and humans share. It is known as the fight, flight or freeze response. Adults can experience this and children can also have similar responses but cannot, as easily, rationalise that they will be okay, or have the resources to feel safe.

The way children see and understand their parent's response is very important. Children are aware of their parent's worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive after a major event. A child's response also depends on their age, how directly connected they are to the event, and the support that they get from the adults in their lives.

Symptoms and Responses to an Unexpected Event

Following an unexpected event most people experience a wide range of physical and emotional reactions.

Some general reactions common to children (these can vary depending on age) are –

- Fearfulness, clinginess
- Fretful, tearful
- Irritable or more stubborn (more tantrums and playing up)
- Withdrawing or showing lack of response
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits (such as trouble getting to sleep, sleeping more than usual, or sleep disturbances such as nightmares or waking during the night)
- Easily distracted, forgetful
- Physical complaints (such as stomach ache, body aches, headaches, feeling sick)
- Temporary regression in toileting, speech or self confidence
- Difficulty expressing emotions, or conflict of emotions
- Increased fears about others safety

You can expect these symptoms and responses to last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as the event is processed.

How Adults Can Help

- Be honest – let children know what is happening and allow questions
- Give age appropriate information – we often have no adequate explanations about events. It is fine to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get upset too.
- Listen and Comfort without avoiding the subject or by overreacting – often a child's fears and fantasies are much more frightening and disturbing than the truth.
- Regularly reassure them that you are doing everything you can to keep them safe
- Keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- Keep expectations about behaviour consistent
- Use words to describe feelings
- Encourage opportunities for emotional outlets such as sport, physical activity and creativity
- Avoid expectations of adult behaviour
- Talk to them about what are common responses to these types of events

Some Common Tips to Help Children When They are Having Trouble Sleeping

- Keep bed time as consistent as possible
- Have a set 'winding down' period before required bedtime where you prepare your child (bath, warm drink, story time)
- Help your child to refrain from exercise at least 4 hours before bedtime
- Try and use only the recognised place for sleeping (ie: bedroom instead of another place that isn't a part of their routine)
- Make sure your child's bed and bedroom are as quiet and comfortable as can be
- Reassure children that they are loved and supported

Helpful Tips for Calming Children That Parents can Help Them With

Tummy Breathing

Helping your body learn to relax is a good way to help yourself feel better.

1. Lie on the floor or bed and place a small soft toy on your tummy.
2. Breathe deeply in and out making the soft toy on your tummy rise during inhaling.
3. Slowly count backwards from 5 while breathing through your nose and then slowly breathe out through your mouth while again counting backwards from 5.
4. As you are slowly breathing in and out make sure that the soft toy on your tummy rises each time you breathe in and out.
5. Complete this 4 times before you go to sleep.

Worry Stones/Messages

You need 5 small round stones, a small paper bag and a pen.

1. At night, before bedtime, you take a stone from the bag and tell your worry or feelings to it - one worry per stone. Or alternatively write the worry on a piece of paper.
2. Place the stones under your pillow so that you do not need to think about them while you are sleeping.
3. In the morning your worries are gone.
4. If needed repeat the next night before bed.

Bubbles

You need Bubbles and Bubble Wand

1. At night before bedtime blow as hard as you can through the Bubble Wand.
2. Repeat several times until you feel calm.

Draw a Different Ending

You will need paper and felt pens.

1. At night draw a picture about what you are worried about.
 2. Scrunch up the page.
 3. Draw the picture again with a different ending.
- Eg: imagine your favourite superhero fighting off scary monsters.

Reading Material

Recommended additional resources that can be purchased through www.skylight.co.nz are:

“A Terrible Thing Happened” for children aged 4-8 years

“Something has Happened” for children aged 3-6 years

“When Tough Stuff Happens” for children aged 7-12 years

“The Journey Through – Ideas for Getting Through Tough Times – for teenagers