

The role of primary care providers in supporting children, families, and themselves following disasters

Children can become distressed after a disaster. Healthcare providers can identify signs of distress and help support families. Providers can also monitor their own stress and practice self-care strategies.

Common changes to watch for in children:

- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulty with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs



Signs that referral to a mental health care professional may be needed:

- Child’s reactions **interfere** with their home and school activities
- Child shows **no signs of getting better**
- Family expresses **significant concerns** outside physician’s expertise

Identify mental health professionals with a specialty in trauma in your area—a “warm handoff” can make all the difference. Visit NCTSN.org for help.

Strategies to share with parents:

- **Stay calm** and reassure children they are safe
- **Take time** to talk about the disaster
- **Answer** questions at a level appropriate for child’s age; address rumors if needed
- **Limit** exposure to media coverage of the event, including TV and social media
- **Be a role model**, including taking care of yourself by taking breaks from media coverage, exercising and eating well
- **Be extra patient and attentive**, checking back in with your child on a regular basis

Offering support to families affected by disasters can take an emotional toll on you. To reduce secondary traumatic stress (STS) reactions:

- **Acknowledge that STS can impact anyone** helping families after a traumatic event.
- **Learn the symptoms** including physical (fatigue, illness) and mental (fear, withdrawal, guilt).
- **Allow time** for you and your family to recover from the disaster.
- **Create a menu of personal self-care activities** that you enjoy, such as spending time with friends and family, exercising, or reading a book.
- **Take a break** from media coverage of the disaster.
- **Ask for help** if you feel overwhelmed or concerned that the disaster is affecting your ability to care for your family and patients as you did before the disaster.

Resources available to share with families:

American Academy of Pediatrics
(www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment)

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
(www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/parents.html)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
(www.nctsn.org)

SAMHSA’s Disaster Distress Hotline #1-800-985-5990 or
(www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/disaster-types)



U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention