New York Life Foundation



The power of parenting: addressing fears and feelings from prior losses

Resilient Parenting

A PARTNER IN NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Around the world, families are struggling to cope with frightening and uncertain times that can include exposure to natural disasters, community violence, and the loss of loved ones. Many people are also experiencing anxiety and grief. Times like these may cause even greater distress for children and parents who have experienced prior losses (such as when a parent or other loved one dies or when a young person has witnessed a death from community violence). We hope that this resource will serve as a reminder of your family's unique resilience by helping you think about what you CAN do to make these moments less stressful.

Loss and trauma reminders

Loss and trauma reminders may be prominent during times of stress. **Loss reminders** are people, places, things, or situations that remind you of the absence of someone you love. **Trauma reminders** are people, places, things or situations that remind you of a terrifying or extremely upsetting event.

Your children may be worrying about the safety of your family, struggling with thoughts and feelings that are hard to name, or feel unsettled when family routines are disrupted. They may also be having flashbacks, angry outbursts, sudden uncontrollable crying, and/or excessive worries related to their earlier loss. Be aware these struggles may be unconscious and are normal.

"Dad always has the TV on. I can't stand it! All this talk about people dying for one reason or another. It's like the shooting all over again. I just remember sitting in those chairs, waiting to hear who lived or died. Now we're just sitting around again, waiting to see who lives and dies."

— Mitchell, age 17

"You don't get it! You have no idea what I am going through! This always happens to me and you could never understand! I am done with you too. Leave me the _____ alone!"

—Marvine, age 15

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- Start a conversation with your children about what is on their mind. If they seem distressed, ask whether anything lately has been bringing back reminders of their loss.
- Acknowledge youth's emotions and impact of past losses on current feelings. Accept that you may be the focus of their emotions because there is nowhere else for them to safely "put" these feelings now.
- Focus on strengths and lessons learned from prior losses (e.g., "You were able to get through that very upsetting time and you're even stronger now" or "You showed that you have the tools to cope with really sad and scary situations. I know you can get through this and I am here for you.").
- Remain committed to routines (stable and predictable routines in general help kids to cope).
- Make space for yourself to process this ongoing event so you can better support your children.

Coping with separation

Children may be reminded of prior losses if they are forced to separate from a caregiver.

"I can't stop worrying about my grandma. First, I lost my Mom last year to stupid cancer, and now, this! Gran was sick the first two weeks we were home. She kept telling me she was fine, but she had to stay in her room and I saw her checking her temperature a lot. Gran is over 60 and they say seniors who get sick are more likely to die. So I'm sanitizing everything the best I can, just like I did when Mom was sick." —Julian, age 12

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- If you or another caregiver is ill, maintain honest and open communication with your child (e.g., "I know it feels scary that Gran is sick right now, but we will always tell you how she's doing every step of the way. I wonder if the illness is scarier for you because we've already lost Dad and now you are worried other people you love will die too.")
- Listen to your children's worry and let them know that their worry is normal and that they are not alone in their concern about their loved one. (e.g., "We're all pulling for your brother and hoping for his recovery. Sometimes it helps just to know that we are all in this together, and support each other in sharing our feelings.") Share one of the things you do to cope when you are feeling worried.
- Point out all the "helpers" that are taking good care of your loved one.
- Know that you won't get your responses right all of the time and you may have to pause before repairing your relationship with your child. Emotions are running high for everyone and that is part of navigating this time.



- Keep developmental differences in mind. What you say to a teenager will need to be different than what you say to a young child. Try to use age appropriate language but remain honest about what is happening to a loved one.

The mind-body connection

For children who have histories of traumatic loss, they may be reminded of these losses by their own physiological sensations (e.g., feeling panicky, heart palpitations, trembling etc.) when forced to separate from someone who is sick, as this may feel similar to how they experienced a former traumatic separation.

"Mama, my stomach hurts again. When are you going to come home from the hospital?"
—Laila, age 6

CAREGIVER RESPONSE:

- Point out the differences between "then" and "now", emphasizing the fact that your child may have felt unsafe in the past, but now there are adults in their lives making sure they are safe and protected.
- Remind your child (or have other caregivers remind them) that your family is resilient and you know how to cope with big feelings. Name the feelings (including anger and the right to it) and have another adult in the home (or via phone) check in with your child daily on an emotional level if you are separated. Have other caregivers support your child and you in staying in contact with cards, texts, phone calls or video chats if possible.
- Model how to ask for help. Reach out to your support system and ask them to check in on you and your kids.
- Practice emotion-focused activities as a family. For example, do deep breathing exercises, go for walks, or listen to music together.

Self care

As parents/caregivers, you are better able to care for your children/teens if you take care of yourselves. Make sure you find ways each day to care for yourself. Practice good rest/sleep, healthy eating, and exercise. What can bring you calm? (e.g., playing music, talking to a friend) What can bring you joy (spending time with family members or gardening)? Find a practical activity to do each day (e.g., organize a closet, take a walk) and focus on positive things in your life right now whenever possible. Faith and cultural leaders may offer support as well.

Resources

For more information, visit:

>> https://reachinstitute.asu.edu/programs/resilient-parenting-for-bereaved-families-from-science-to-service

>>www.tagcenter.org

Extra help

Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/ teens' abilities to function or you are worried, contact your child's doctor or a mental health professional. If you need some extra help, seek similar services for yourself. There are helplines as well as mental health professionals providing their services through telehealth. One such hotline to get support regarding your anxiety or stress is the SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985- 5990 or by texting TalkWithUS to 66746. The Lucine Center for Trauma and Grief (www.lucinecenter.com) also provides teletherapy to children and teens who may be struggling after a death.

This fact sheet was co-sponsored by the New York Life Foundation and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Drawing from experiences of bereaved caregivers, researchers and mental health professionals, the developers of this fact sheet include Jeanette Koncikowski, John Hill, Julie Kaplow, Irwin Sandler, Shannon CrossBear, Sharon LeGore, Sarah Gardner, Diane Lanni, Chris Foreman, and Jill Harrington-LaMorie.



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