

Disaster Related Anxiety

Helping Children Handle Disaster Related Anxiety

Just like adults, each child responds differently to disasters. Unlike adults, however, children have little or no experience to help them place their current problems into perspective. Even if the disaster occurs miles away from the child's location, it can still be a very real, and very 'near' threat to them. Children sense the anxiety and tension in adults around them, and experience the same feelings of helplessness and lack of control that disasters such as the Colorado wildfires can bring about.

The following are some guidelines that may be helpful in assisting children of all ages in coping with the devastation the wildfires are causing.

Age Related Responses to Disaster

• Pre-School Age

Behavior such as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, unusual fears, or unexplained bouts of crying may intensify in younger children. It's important to remember that these children are not being "bad" – they're confused and afraid. Here are some tips on how to help:

- Reassure young children that they are safe.
- Get an understanding of the child's feelings about the disaster; answer all questions they may have.
- Structure children's play so that it remains constructive, serving as an outlet for their anxiety.
- Provide extra comfort, love, and contact.

• Grade-School Age

Children this age may ask many questions about the disaster, and it's important that you try and answer them in clear and simple language. Do not give false reassurance that a similar disaster will never affect your family or others again. Try and explain that disasters are rare, and assure them that adults are working very hard to make things safe again. In addition to curiosity about the disaster, some children may exhibit such behaviors as disobedience, excessive clinging, irrational fears, or distractibility. Keep these thoughts in mind when talking to your children:

- Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing, this can be very therapeutic for them.
- Keep open discussion about the disaster and don't be afraid to say, "I don't know".
- If a child is concerned about a parent who is distressed, don't tell the child not to worry – doing so will just make the child worry more.
- Monitor children's media viewing. Limit exposure to disaster images that can be frightening to them.

• Adolescents

Older youth may try and downplay their worries, thus suppressing their feelings. When adolescents are distressed, they may express their fears through such behaviors as increased risk-taking behavior, aggressiveness, change in sleep patterns, or use of alcohol and other drugs. What you can do:

- Encourage older youth to work out their concerns about the disaster. It's generally a good idea to talk about these issues, including honest communication about the financial, physical and emotional impacts.
- Monitor their media exposure to the event and information they receive on the Internet.
- Encourage the adolescent to turn to friends and family for support.

Tips for Adults Coping with Disaster Related Anxiety

The Colorado wildfires have had a profound impact on our state and our communities. Each person will react differently and a range of responses to a disaster are normal and to be expected. Emotional responses to disasters can appear immediately or sometimes months later.

Whether or not you are directly or indirectly impacted by this disaster, understanding what you're feeling and taking certain steps can be instrumental to helping you and others cope.

Common Response to Disaster

Physical Reactions:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Hypersomnia
- Headaches
- Appetite changes
- Hyperactivity
- Stomach problems

Cognitive Reactions:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty solving problems
- Memory disturbance
- Inability to attach importance to anything other than the disaster

Emotional Reactions:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Anger & Irritability
- Over Sensitivity
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feelings of helplessness

If you experience strong feelings that won't go away or if you are troubled for longer than four to six weeks, you may want to seek professional help.

Things You Can Do

- Talk about it. Not expressing your feelings will keep you from being able to work through what happened. By talking with others, you will relieve stress and realize that other people share your feelings.
- Get plenty of rest and exercise. Remember to eat well. Avoid excessive drinking and risk-taking activities.
- Spend time with your family. If you have any children, encourage them to discuss their concerns and feelings with you.
- As soon as it feels comfortable, go back to your normal routine.
- Do things that you find relaxing and soothing.

- Recall other times you have experienced strong emotions and how they were resolved.
- Do something positive that will help you gain a greater sense of control (for example, donate food or clothing)
- If you feel overwhelmed, **ask for help**. It's not a sign of weakness.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.