

Normal Reactions to Abnormal Events

Distressing events can profoundly impact individuals in unique ways. The following is a list of normal responses to abnormal situations. Recognizing these reactions can be the first step in coping and healing.



Funded by the European Union



Physical Reactions

- Constant fatigue, even after good rest.
- Difficulty falling asleep or nightmares.
- Physical ailments, such as headaches, stomach problems, or muscle tension.
- Changes in eating habits, such as loss of appetite.



Cognitive Reactions

- Difficulties with concentration and making decisions.
- Difficulty remembering things.
- Constant thoughts about the event and its consequences.
- Reevaluation of personal or religious beliefs.



Emotional Reactions

- Intense and constant worries and fear, for example, about safety or the future.
- Deep sorrow over what has been lost.
- Mood swings, such as irritation, bitterness, and anger, sometimes over trivial matters.
- Overwhelming feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.



Behavioural Reactions

- Isolation and avoidance of social interactions.
- Increased use of screens and video games to distract oneself.
- Changes in activity, for example, showing signs of hyperactivity or hypoactivity, or numbness.
- Avoidance, for example, avoiding places, people, or activities that remind one of the event.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In times of crisis, children often experience confusion, fear, and uncertainty.

Below are some key strategies to help children feel safe, understood, and cared for during a crisis:

- **Ensure Physical and Emotional Closeness:** Keep children close to family and friends to provide them with physical and emotional security.
- **Create a Safe Environment:** Maintain as much calmness and stability as possible in their surroundings to help children feel safe.
- **Promote Physical Well-being:** Ensure they are getting adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise, which are fundamental for coping with stress.
- **Engage in Enjoyable Activities:** Spend quality time with children doing activities they love, like playing games, drawing, or being outdoors.
- **Simple and Honest Communication:** When discussing the crisis, use simple, age-appropriate language. Be honest but avoid overwhelming or frightening details.
- **Limit Media Exposure:** Minimize children's exposure to potentially distressing content on television or social media.
- **Routine and Structure:** Try to maintain some kind of routine, as predictability can be reassuring for children during uncertain times.
- **Encourage Expression:** Give children opportunities to express their feelings through talking, drawing, or other creative activities. Validate their emotions.
- **Listen and Reassure:** Be an active listener to their concerns and fears.

As caregivers supporting children through crises, it's important to remember to be kind to ourselves, recognizing that we are also navigating difficult times. Accepting that we might not always be at our best helps maintain our own well-being while we care for others.

When to Seek Professional Help for Children in Times of Crisis?

While many children can recover from the stress of a crisis with the support of caring adults, some need the assistance of a mental health professional. Below are signs that indicate the need for professional intervention.

- **Significant Behavioural Changes:** Behaviour such as increased aggression, withdrawal from interaction, or regression to earlier developmental behaviours.
- **Persistent Anxiety or Fear:** If a child remains excessively anxious, fearful, or clingy, long after the crisis event, to the extent that it interferes with daily activities.
- **Changes in Eating and Sleeping Habits:** Noticeable and persistent changes in appetite or sleep patterns, like refusing to eat or experiencing nightmares and sleep disturbances.
- **Decline in Academic Performance:** A significant drop in grades or loss of interest in schoolwork and other activities they previously enjoyed.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Persistent physical symptoms with no apparent medical cause, such as headaches, stomach-aches.
- **Mood Swings or Emotional Outbursts:** Extreme mood swings or emotional reactions that are disproportionate to the situation, or a consistent display of sadness or depression.
- **Talking About Self-Harm or Hopelessness:** Expressing thoughts of self-harm, death, or expressing feelings of hopelessness about the future.

It's normal for children to exhibit some of these behaviours shortly after a crisis but if these behaviours persist for several weeks or worsen over time, it may signal a child's difficulty in coping with experience.