

For Parents: Helping Children Control Their Fears



What You Should Know

After children go through a very scary event, they may feel afraid for days or weeks or even longer. They often have a hard time connecting their upset feelings to the really upsetting experiences that they had previously. This is perfectly understandable and expectable. When they are upset, you can remind your children of the link between what they are feeling now and the scary event they went through. Here are a few more tips to help your children handle their fears.

What Can Help

- **Encourage children to do their everyday activities.** Keep to your family routines, eat meals together, go to school and after-school activities, and spend time with friends.
- **Spend extra time with your children.** Doing things you did before the disaster will help comfort them now. Read them stories, play games with them, or go for walks.
- **Encourage your children to tell you—or an adult they know well and trust—when they are feeling afraid or worried.** Tell your children that you can help them figure out why they are feeling that way and how to make them to feel better.
- **Remind children that sometimes people feel afraid.** After a scary event, many people feel afraid even when they are no longer in danger.
- **Remind children that they are safe now.** Tell the child what you or the community are doing to keep them safe. If the danger is not over yet (aftershocks, debris in the streets, power lines down), tell your child what to do to keep safe.
- **Teach your children to take a few slow, relaxing breaths.** This helps their bodies to calm down and stop panicking. Walk them through the following steps:
 1. “Put your hand on your stomach when you breathe in and notice how it sticks out like a balloon filling up with air. Breathe in slowly as you count to three: one . . . two . . . three. Think about your favorite color and all the good things that are that color.”
 2. “When you breathe out, your stomach should shrink back in, like when a balloon loses air. Breathe out slowly as you count to five: one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. Think about the color gray and all the upsetting feelings leaving your body.”
 3. “Great! Now do this a few more times.”

Make this practice fun by having your children blow bubbles or act out a story in which the main character uses slow breathing. Kids also like being the expert; after they master this skill, they can teach it to another family member.