



What You Should Know

Often when children have experienced overwhelming upsetting events, they have a hard time not thinking about them. When they try their best not to think about the disaster, upsetting memories may still pop into their minds. Children may feel as if the event is happening all over again. Re-experiencing awful feelings, thoughts, or memories is even worse when they seem to occur out of nowhere. When children feel they have no control over their thoughts and feelings, they may feel the same helplessness that they felt during the disaster itself. Sometimes they might not even be aware of the things that trigger the frightening memories. Teaching your child about those triggers and reminders is the first step to help him/her take back control of those thoughts and feelings.

What Can Help

- **Be aware of how you're feeling.** If you are upset, angry or distressed, take time to calm yourself before you respond to your child. As long as you are annoyed or irritable, you won't be able to soothe or support him/her.
- **Remind children of the connection between their behavior and feelings.** The best time to make the connection is when they are not distressed or acting out. Pick a quiet time, but not bedtime, to suggest that perhaps an outburst that happened earlier in the day was due to remembering the event.
- **Maintain routines that your family had before the disaster.** Children feel safest when there is order and predictability.
- **Identify triggers/reminders.** If your child seems to get stirred up or especially nervous at particular times, try to help him/her think about what he/she did, saw, smelled, or felt before the feeling started. Here are some questions to help identify triggers and reminders:
 - Was there a thought or memory that entered your head just then?
 - Did anything remind you of the event?
 - Do the images or feelings seem to come at specific times of the day?
 - Do the memories pop up around particular people or places?
 - Do you notice any smells, sights, or sounds around the time that memories come up?
 - Do the memories seem to pop-up when you are talking about certain things, hearing others talking about certain things, hearing certain stories, watching certain types of TV shows or movies?

Once you've identified the triggers/reminders, help your child identify some things he/she can do when being triggered, such as talking with you, drawing or writing in a journal, or doing something fun to take his/ her mind off the upsetting reminder.

- **Help your child replace the intrusive or unwanted thought or memory with a positive, more pleasant thought or memory.** The positive memory can be anything: a special moment like scoring a goal, getting a good mark on an exam or project, or taking a ride at an amusement park. It doesn't matter what the memory is, as long as it works.
- **Help him/her practice a controlled, relaxing breathing exercise.** If at the time of an intrusive thought or memory, your child becomes anxious, try saying:
 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, feel your stomach shrinking 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."

When You Know Something Is Wrong, but Your Child Can't Tell You

At times, you may know that your child is having intrusive, unwanted thoughts or memories about the event, and that he/she is unable or too scared to discuss them with you. He/she may seem withdrawn, spaced out, or quietly agitated. If this occurs, try these suggestions:

1. **Engage in a soothing or enjoyable activity with your child.** Doing something calming or fun with you can help reorient your child to the present moment and take his/her mind off of what is bothering him/her.
2. **Offer your child a shoulder or back rub.** Touch can help reorient a child to what is happening in the here and now.
3. **Offer a cold or hot drink (whichever he/she usually prefers).** The taste and smell can help remind your child that he/she is safe and the disaster is not actually occurring.
4. **If there is an aroma that your child likes, try to have him/her smell it** (something cooking, incense, laundry detergent, bathroom product). Aromas also can help reorient children.
5. **Do the controlled, relaxing breathing exercise** described above.
6. **Discuss possible triggers** as described above.