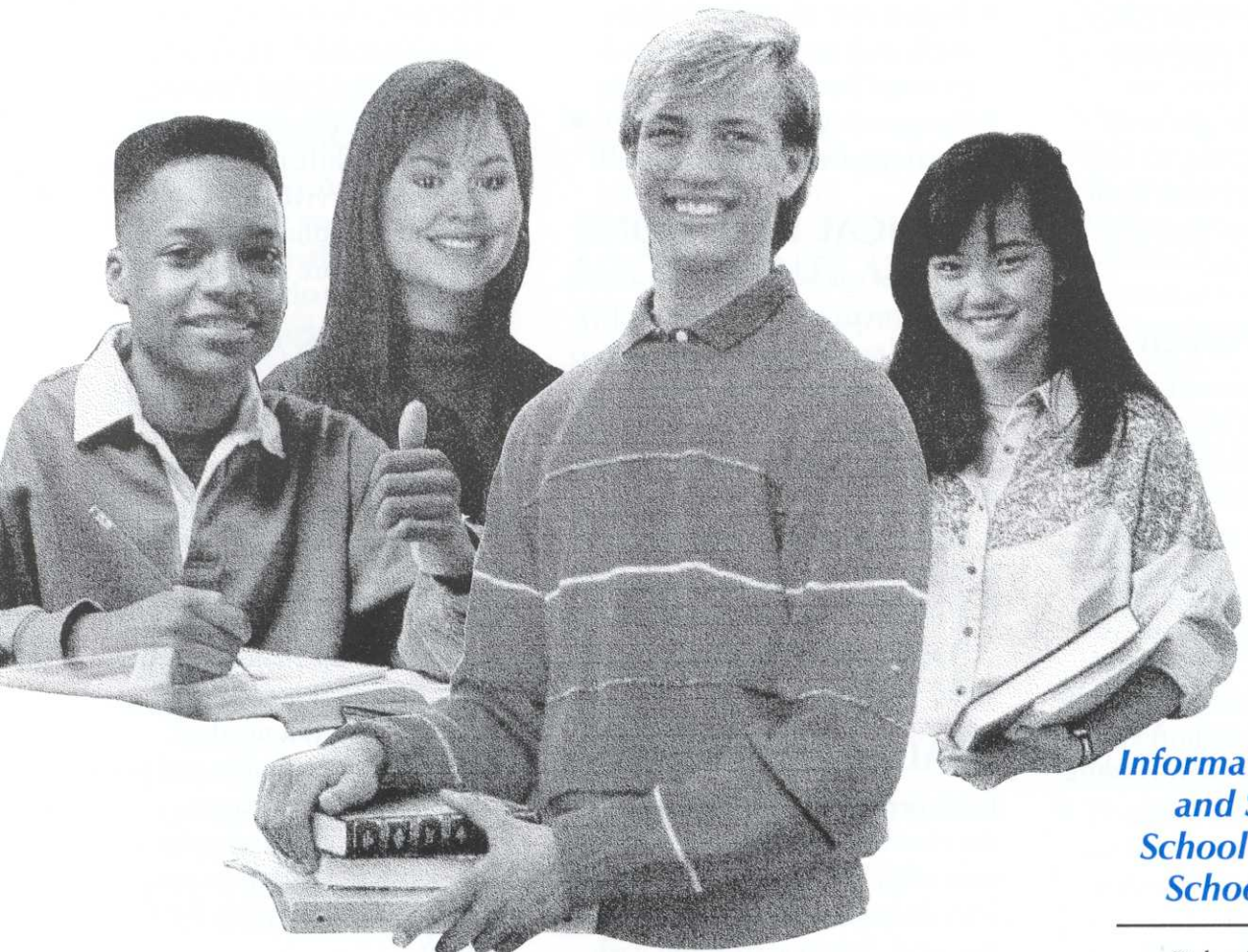
COPING STRATEGIES FOR ADOLESCENTS AFTER A DISASTER



Information for Middle and Senior High School Teachers and School Personnel

Behavioral/Emotional Reactions

Physical Reactions

Healing Strategies

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When teachers and school personnel experience a traumatic event along with their students, they have the double burden of resolving personal feelings while also trying to help teenagers through their reactions. This brochure is a guide for middle school and senior high school teachers and others who work with adolescents. It is also intended to help teachers and school staff provide guidance and support to parents, to help them work together with their adolescents to aid in recovery from disaster trauma.

AFTER A DISASTER

A trauma – an abnormal, distressing event such as a natural disaster – can result in emotional and/or physical distress. Stress levels can increase to the point that normal coping strategies effective for dealing with daily life become insufficient.

There is no right or wrong way to respond to a trauma. A range of reactions is normal, including behavioral, emotional, and physical reactions.

BEHAVIORAL/ EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- Depression or sadness
- Suicidal fantasies
- Decline in social interest or activities
- Feelings of inadequacy or helplessness
- Marked increase or decrease in physical activity level
- Confusion, lack of focus, difficulty concentrating on planned activities
- Spending an unusual amount of time fantasizing
- A lessening in the struggle for independence as the teen returns to the security of parental control
- Regression to earlier behaviors, such as sleeping in parents' bed
- Survivor's guilt
- Anxiety, irritability

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

- Sleeplessness
- Nightmares
- Withdrawal into heavy sleep
- Bowel, bladder, digestive problems
- Headaches and tension
- Skin rashes
- Other physical reactions, such as hair loss
- Unusually painful menstrual cramps, or an interruption in the cycle

HEALING STRATEGIES

Each person struggles through the recovery process at his/her own rate. These coping strategies have helped adolescents reduce the stress often associated with recovery:

- Denial. When used in moderation, the refusal to believe that the stressful situation exists can provide badly needed relief from overwhelmingly stressful circumstances.
- Crying. Crying relieves pain.
- Sleep/Fantasizing. Sleep provides escape from reality, distancing one temporarily from the traumatic event.
- Altruism. Helping others allows many teenagers to feel empowered.
- Education/Anticipation. Learning what causes disasters helps reduce panic, and planning ahead for other disasters helps everyone feel more in control.
- Humor. Humor acts as a relief valve to reduce stress and anxiety, and is a good distraction.
- Change of Perspective. As teenagers shift to seeing themselves as survivors instead of victims, handling the trauma becomes more manageable.

COPING AS A FAMILY

As a unit, families can work together to promote recovery for each member. Teachers and school personnel can suggest the following strategies to families with teenagers:

- Accept the fact that you have experienced a major trauma. Being bewildered, overwhelmed and in need of support is acceptable and part of the recovery process.
- Remember that everyone recovers at a different pace and is affected differently by the event.
- Get the whole family involved in rebuilding and cleanup efforts.
- Be highly tolerant of each other.
- Show affection and be caring.
- Be flexible about family roles. As much as possible, everyone should pitch in to do work in the household.

- Be aware of role reversals. Adolescents might find themselves in the position of caretaker for the first time in their lives. Remember that their needs must be met, too. They must not shoulder the entire family's burdens themselves.

RE-ESTABLISHING COMMUNICATION WITH TEENAGERS

Adolescents may require special attention. Their natural need to rebel, coupled with confusion and rage over what they have experienced, might make them especially difficult to reach in a time of crisis. Be patient. Take time to communicate and re-establish bonds.

- Try to learn as much as possible about how young people deal with stress. Informational brochures, magazines, and books can be very helpful, and the school psychologist or counselor can help you understand what your teen is experiencing.
- Make time to be with your teenager. Share meals together. Enjoy each other's company.
- Listen to each other, including what is not said.
- Avoid being judgmental. Let your goal be better understanding.
- Allow teens to see your vulnerability. Express your anxiety about what has happened and acknowledge your fears.
- Handle conflict as a problem to be solved, not as a war. Avoid pre-judging, labeling or name-calling. Focus on the issue at hand.
- Be specific about rules and expectations, and spell out consequences in advance. Special rules, such as curfews, may be imposed during a disaster. Give your teen a chance to express views.
- Treat teenagers with respect. Praise and acknowledge their accomplishments.

ADOLESCENTS AT RISK

Although most teenagers will successfully cope with disaster, some are at greater risk of developing problems. The adolescents most at risk for developing post-traumatic stress syndrome and other emotional problems will have experienced one or more of the following:

- Loss of someone important (a parent, friend, sibling, or pet) prior to, or as a result of, the disaster
- A family that is non-supportive, chaotic or violent
- Parents whose reactions to the disaster are extremely disturbed, or who suffer a mood disorder
- A previous traumatic experience
- An injury as a result of the disaster.

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Teachers and other caring adults should be aware of these risk factors. Crisis intervention can help young people who have difficulty coping with trauma. If problems persist, professional counseling may be necessary and should be recommended.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Active community involvement can be an effective coping strategy. Teachers, counselors, churches, neighbors, clubs and community agencies can provide the structure, organization and setting to help teenagers help themselves.

- Teens can organize or participate in community rehabilitation and recovery efforts.
- Parents and others can help teens develop a disaster plan for their home, school or community.
- Schools, churches and clubs can conduct group discussions about the disaster.
- Teachers can engage teens in activities to help them deal with the experience: Encourage students to express their feelings through art and literature; explore and understand the natural phenomenon that created the disaster; discover the unique psychological and health issues related to the disaster.
- Schools can provide a comfortable place to study and work for teenagers who have been displaced by the disaster.
- Teachers can temporarily reduce expectations for schoolwork and homework.

- Counselors can train teenagers to become peer counselors, to help other teens in need of someone to talk to.
- Community agencies, churches and clubs can involve teens in planning recreational events for the community, to emphasize that relaxing and having fun are important aspects of healing.
- City or county mental health departments can provide individual, family and group crisis counseling, as well as education about the behavioral and emotional aspects of a disaster. They can also teach relaxation skills to relieve stress from the disaster.

RECOVERY

Healing takes time, and the road to recovery can be bumpy. Certain events may re-awaken anxieties or bring back symptoms. Understand the recovery process, use effective coping skills, maintain a positive attitude, and rely on supportive family and friends.

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Project REBOUND
Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health
2415 West Sixth Street • Los Angeles, CA 90057

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