

Parent Tips for Helping Adolescents after Disasters

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
<u>Detachment, shame, and guilt</u>	<p>→ Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. → Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.</p>	<p>→ “Many kids- and adults- feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they couldn’t do more. You’re not at fault-remember; even the firefighters said there was nothing more we could have done.”</p>
<p><u>Self-consciousness:</u> About their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal.</p>	<p>→ Help teens understand that these feelings are common. → Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.</p>	<p>→ “I was feeling the same thing. Scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside.” → “My cell phone is working again, why don’t you see if you can get a hold of Pete to see how he’s doing.” → “And thanks for playing the game with your little sister. She’s much better now.”</p>
<p><u>Acting out behavior:</u> Using alcohol and drugs, sexual acting out, accident-prone behavior.</p>	<p>→ Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. → Limit access to alcohol and drugs. → Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. → On a time-limited basis, have them let you know where they are going and what they’re planning to do.</p>	<p>→ “Many teens- and some adults- feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It’s very normal to feel that way- but it’s not a good idea to act on it.” → “It’s important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you.” Assure them that this extra checking-in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.</p>
<u>Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders</u>	<p>→ Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it.</p>	<p>→ “When you’re reminded, you might try saying to yourself, ‘I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because there is no ¹ fire and I am safe’”</p>

¹ hurricane

	→ Explain to teens that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again.	→ Suggest “Watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. How about turning it off now?”
<u>Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships:</u> Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent’s reactions in the crisis	→ Explain that the strain on relationships is expectable. Emphasize that we need family and friends for support during the recovery period. → Encourage tolerance for different family member’s courses to recovery. → Accept responsibility for your own feelings.	→ Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Say, “You know, the fact that we’re crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we’ve been through. I think we’re handling things amazingly. It’s a good thing we have each other.” → You might say, “I appreciate your being calm when your brother was screaming last night. I know he woke you up too.” → “I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I am going to work harder to stay calm myself.”
<u>Radical changes in attitude</u>	→ Explain that changes in people’s attitudes after a disaster are common, but will return back to normal over time.	→ “We are all under great stress. When people’s lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry- even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we all will feel better when we get back to a more structured routine.”
<u>Wanting premature entrance into adulthood:</u> E.g., wanting to leave school, get married.	→ Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to make the adolescent feel more in control over things.	→ “I know you’re thinking about quitting school and getting a job to help out. But it’s important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis time is not a great time to make major changes.”
<u>Concern for other victims and families</u>	→ Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility.	→ Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g., clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).

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