



Reactions of Children Age 5 & Under to Disaster & Tragedy

Produced by FEI Behavioral Health

The information below identifies the most frequently occurring reactions of children in response to a disaster or tragedy. Most of the reactions appearing in children aged 5 and under are expressed in a nonverbal way.

These reactions include:

- crying in various forms, including whimpering, screaming, and explicit cries for help
- immobility, trembling and frightened expressions
- running either toward the adult or in aimless motion
- excessive clinging

Regressive behaviors that were considered acceptable at an earlier age, and the parent regarded as past, may reappear, including:

- thumb-sucking
- excessive whining
- fear of darkness or animals
- fear of crowds, of being left alone or with strangers
- asking to be dressed or fed
- bed-wetting, loss of bladder or bowel control

Other reactions indicative of fears and anxieties include:

- nightmares
- night terrors
- inability to sleep through the night
- inability to sleep without a light or unless someone is present
- sadness, especially over loss of persons or prized possessions
- marked sensitivity to loud noises
- weather fears, such as of lightning, rain, high winds
- irritability
- confusion
- speech difficulties
- eating problems

When to Seek Professional Help for Your Children

Reactions may appear immediately after the tragedy or disaster or after the passage of days or even weeks. Most often they are transient and soon disappear. Many of the above reactions can be diminished by the parents themselves through understanding of the basis for the behaviors and giving extra attention and caring. Reactions generally can be considered “normal” if they occur for a short period during or following the event. When they persist, however, parents should recognize that a more serious emotional concern may be developing and professional help should be sought.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call 337-436-9533 or 1-888-414-FYCA.

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