

# **Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program Trainer's Toolkit**

## **Handout 3**

### **Disaster Reactions and Interventions**



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
Center for Mental Health Services  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



**FEMA**

## Disaster Reactions and Interventions

Age Group	Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Intervention Options
<b>Preschool (1–5)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clinging to parents or familiar adults</li> <li>- Helplessness and passive behavior</li> <li>- Resumption of bed-wetting or thumb-sucking</li> <li>- Fears of the dark</li> <li>- Avoidance of sleeping alone</li> <li>- Increased crying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loss of appetite</li> <li>- Stomachaches</li> <li>- Nausea</li> <li>- Sleep problems or nightmares</li> <li>- Speech difficulties</li> <li>- Tics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anxiety</li> <li>- Generalized fear</li> <li>- Irritability</li> <li>- Angry outbursts</li> <li>- Sadness</li> <li>- Withdrawal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preoccupation with disaster</li> <li>- Poor concentration</li> <li>- Recurring dreams or nightmares</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give verbal reassurance and physical comfort</li> <li>- Clarify misconceptions repeatedly</li> <li>- Provide comforting bedtime routines</li> <li>- Help with labels for emotions</li> <li>- Avoid unnecessary separations</li> <li>- Permit child to sleep in parents' room temporarily</li> <li>- Demystify reminders</li> <li>- Encourage expression regarding losses (deaths, pets, toys)</li> <li>- Monitor media exposure</li> <li>- Encourage expression through play activities</li> </ul>

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Age Group	Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Intervention Options
<b>Childhood (6–11)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decline in school performance</li> <li>- School avoidance</li> <li>- Aggressive behavior at home or school</li> <li>- Hyperactive or silly behavior</li> <li>- Whining, clinging, or acting like a younger child</li> <li>- Increased competition with younger siblings for parents' attention</li> <li>- Traumatic play and reenactments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Change in appetite</li> <li>- Headaches</li> <li>- Stomachaches</li> <li>- Sleep disturbances or nightmares</li> <li>- Somatic complaints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fear of feelings</li> <li>- Withdrawal from friends or familiar activities</li> <li>- Reminders triggering fears</li> <li>- Angry outbursts</li> <li>- Preoccupation with crime, criminals, safety, and death</li> <li>- Self-blame</li> <li>- Guilt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preoccupation with disaster</li> <li>- Poor concentration</li> <li>- Recurring dreams or nightmares</li> <li>- Disorientation or confusion</li> <li>- Flashbacks</li> <li>- Questioning of spiritual beliefs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give additional attention and consideration</li> <li>- Relax expectations of performance at home and at school temporarily</li> <li>- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out</li> <li>- Provide structured but undemanding home chores and rehabilitation activities</li> <li>- Encourage verbal and play expression of thoughts and feelings</li> <li>- Listen to child's repeated retelling of traumatic event</li> <li>- Clarify child's distortions and misconceptions</li> <li>- Identify and assist with reminders</li> <li>- Develop school program for peer support, expressive activities, education on trauma and crime, preparedness planning, and identifying special children</li> </ul>

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Age Group	Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Intervention Options
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pre-Adolescence and Adolescence (12–18)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decline in academic performance</li> <li>- Rebellion at home or school</li> <li>- Decline in responsible behavior</li> <li>- Agitation or decrease in energy level, or apathy</li> <li>- Delinquent behavior</li> <li>- Risk-taking behavior</li> <li>- Social withdrawal</li> <li>- Abrupt shift in relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appetite changes</li> <li>- Headaches</li> <li>- Gastrointestinal problems</li> <li>- Skin eruptions</li> <li>- Complaints of vague aches and pains</li> <li>- Sleep disorders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loss of interest in peer social activities, hobbies, or recreation</li> <li>- Sadness or depression</li> <li>- Anxiety and fearfulness about safety</li> <li>- Resistance to authority</li> <li>- Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness</li> <li>- Guilt, self-blame, shame, and self-consciousness</li> <li>- Desire for revenge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preoccupation with disaster</li> <li>- Poor concentration</li> <li>- Recurring dreams, nightmares, or flashbacks</li> <li>- Disorientation or confusion</li> <li>- Questioning of spiritual beliefs</li> <li>- Difficulty setting priorities</li> <li>- Difficulty making decisions</li> <li>- Loss of objectivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Give additional attention and consideration</li> <li>- Relax expectations of performance at home and school temporarily</li> <li>- Encourage discussion of experience of trauma with peers and significant adults</li> <li>- Avoid insistence on discussion of feelings with parents</li> <li>- Address impulse to recklessness</li> <li>- Link behavior and feelings to event</li> <li>- Encourage physical activities</li> <li>- Encourage resumption of social activities, athletics, clubs, etc.</li> <li>- Encourage participation in community activities and school events</li> <li>- Develop school programs for peer support and debriefing, special student support groups, telephone hotlines, drop-in centers, and identification of special teens</li> </ul>

## Disaster Reactions and Interventions

Age Group	Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Intervention Options
<b>Adults</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sleep problems</li> <li>- Avoidance of reminders</li> <li>- Excessive activity level</li> <li>- Protectiveness toward loved ones</li> <li>- Crying easily</li> <li>- Angry outbursts</li> <li>- Increased conflicts with family</li> <li>- Hypervigilance</li> <li>- Isolation, withdrawal, or shutting down</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nausea</li> <li>- Headaches</li> <li>- Fatigue or exhaustion</li> <li>- Gastrointestinal distress</li> <li>- Appetite change</li> <li>- Somatic complaints</li> <li>- Worsening of chronic conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shock, disorientation, and numbness</li> <li>- Depression or sadness</li> <li>- Grief</li> <li>- Irritability or anger</li> <li>- Anxiety or fear</li> <li>- Despair or hopelessness</li> <li>- Guilt or self-doubt</li> <li>- Mood swings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preoccupation with disaster</li> <li>- Poor concentration</li> <li>- Recurring dreams, nightmares, or flashbacks</li> <li>- Disorientation or confusion</li> <li>- Questioning of spiritual beliefs</li> <li>- Difficulty setting priorities</li> <li>- Difficulty making decisions</li> <li>- Loss of objectivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protect, direct, and connect</li> <li>- Ensure access to emergency medical services</li> <li>- Provide supportive listening and opportunity to talk about experience and losses</li> <li>- Provide frequent rescue and recovery updates and resources for questions</li> <li>- Assist with prioritizing and problem solving</li> <li>- Help family to facilitate communication and effective functioning</li> <li>- Provide information on traumatic stress and coping, children's reactions, and tips for families</li> <li>- Provide information on criminal justice procedures and roles of primary responder groups</li> <li>- Provide crime victim services</li> <li>- Assess and refer, when indicated</li> <li>- Provide information on referral resources</li> <li>- Provide information on substance abuse self-help (for self, family, friends)</li> </ul>

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Age Group	Behavioral Reactions	Physical Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Intervention Options
<b>Older Adults</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Withdrawal and isolation</li> <li>- Reluctance to leave home</li> <li>- Mobility limitations</li> <li>- Relocation adjustment problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Worsening of chronic illnesses</li> <li>- Sleep disorders</li> <li>- Memory problems</li> <li>- Somatic symptoms</li> <li>- More susceptibility to hypothermia and hyperthermia</li> <li>- Physical and sensory limitations (sight, hearing) that interfere with recovery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Depression</li> <li>- Despair about losses</li> <li>- Apathy</li> <li>- Suspicion</li> <li>- Agitation or anger</li> <li>- Fears of institutionalization</li> <li>- Anxiety about unfamiliar surroundings</li> <li>- Embarrassment about receiving "handouts"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preoccupation with disaster</li> <li>- Poor concentration</li> <li>- Recurring dreams, nightmares, or flashbacks</li> <li>- Disorientation or confusion</li> <li>- Questioning of spiritual beliefs</li> <li>- Difficulty setting priorities</li> <li>- Difficulty making decisions</li> <li>- Loss of objectivity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance</li> <li>- Provide orienting information</li> <li>- Ensure physical needs are addressed (water, food, warmth)</li> <li>- Use multiple assessment methods, as problems may be underreported</li> <li>- Assist with reconnecting with family and support systems</li> <li>- Assist in obtaining medical and financial assistance</li> <li>- Encourage discussion of traumatic experience and losses, and expression of emotions</li> <li>- Provide crime victim assistance</li> <li>- Same as adults for substance abuse services</li> </ul>

Adapted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Training manual for mental health and human service workers in major disasters* (DHHS Publication 90-538). Washington, DC: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center for Mental Health Services.