

Helping children survive the aftermath: Nine tips on how to cope with large-scale traumatic events

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Credit: Florida International University

Katrina. Nepal. Sandy Hook. The Boston Marathon. The World Trade Center. Orlando. All are synonymous with tragic loss, inexplicable

catastrophe and an overwhelming sense of vulnerability. All, large-scale traumatic events—some man-made, others the result of Mother Nature's wrath, the rest orchestrated by terror or hate. All, unforgettable.

Many people experience feelings of anxiety, fear and depression following events of such magnitude.

"The more people identify with the victims, the more devastating it can be for them, and the more emotional difficulties they can have afterwards," Jonathan Comer, associate professor of psychology and psychiatry at Florida International University, told [CBS News](#) following the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Fla.

Children are especially vulnerable. They rely on the support of parents, teachers and caregivers to help them deal with their emotions during and after [traumatic events](#). Comer shares some ways to help children cope when tragedy strikes:

- **Be confident.** Research shows parents who act calm in front of their kids tend to have children who feel more secure. Children take their cues from their parents and will be very interested in how you respond to the news. Pay attention to your own emotions and be careful not to show your child excessive displays of emotion.
- **Find out what they know.** As much as possible, stick to answering questions rather than volunteering information that may be overwhelming for your child. When clarifying details, explain the traumatic event in a factual manner, without giving graphic details.
- **Watch smart and avoid overexposure.** The news can at times be unnecessarily alarming, and it can be helpful to talk to your child about the dramatic nature of the news. Just because it's on

the news, doesn't mean that your child is in any immediate danger. Help them distinguish between what is portrayed on the news and the likely security of their direct and immediate worlds. Limit excessive watching of and listening to news of the traumatic event. [Continued media exposure to a traumatic event](#) can have a significant impact on a child's psychological well-being.

- **Feelings are normal.** Let children know that it is normal to feel upset, scared or angry. You want children to accept their feelings and not think that something may be wrong with them.
- **Praise positive thoughts.** When your child offers positive or hopeful thoughts, be sure to praise him or her. Tell children how proud you are of them and encourage them to keep thinking along those lines.
- **Think real.** Don't let your child's anxious thoughts go unchallenged. If your child has an anxious thought, don't just accept it—question and challenge it. Encourage your child to rethink what he or she said and to come up with more realistic versions of the situation. Questions like "has that ever happened to anyone you know?" and "how likely is it that that will actually happen to me?" can really help a child challenge anxious thinking and help him or her cope.
- **Let them know they are safe.** Children want to know that you are doing everything you can to keep them safe. You can also mention specific people that are working together to keep them safe—the police, doctors and even everyday heroes that are taking action to help others in need. There are typically far more heroes than villains after tragic events.
- **Stick to your daily routine as much as possible.** This is a great way to provide your children with stability and reassure them that they are safe.
- **Encourage them to take action.** Have children help raise money, write thank you letters to first responders or even draw

pictures to help them cope. Children can donate even small amounts of money to organizations that advocate peace and tolerance. Doing something to help others in need can be very therapeutic for children and restore their sense of control.

"Children are more resilient than we give them credit for," Comer said. "Usually, modeling a little confidence is all they need to feel that they will personally be OK."

Comer has conducted extensive research on the psychological impact of terrorism and other traumatic events on youth, including the Boston Marathon bombing and the September 11 attacks. As director of the Mental Health Interventions and Technology Program at FIU's [Center for Children and Families](#), he conducts research on expanding the quality, scope and accessibility of [mental health care](#) for youth. Much of his work examines children's media-based exposure to traumatic events and how caregivers can best discuss frightening world events with their [children](#).

Provided by Florida International University

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