

# Nurturing Resilience and Healing in Children and Teenagers Affected by a Tornado

Following a tornado, children and teenagers can be strongly impacted emotionally and behaviorally. These reactions can change depending on how their parents, teachers, and other leaders (pastors, 4-H leaders, and scout leaders, for example) respond to the disaster. There are many ways that parents, teachers, and other leaders can act during the aftermath of a disaster, from how the disaster is discussed to how parents, teachers, and other leaders themselves manage their own well-being. This guide reviews common reactions among children and teenagers following tornados, as well as information to help them recover and heal.

## Common Reactions Among Children

- ▶ It is usual for children to experience anxiety, fear, and worry for the safety of themselves and others following a tornado. They may also have increased worries about future tornados or tornado warnings or exaggerated responses to hearing about tornados (crying, screaming).
- ▶ In addition to these worries, children commonly experience behavioral changes, including increased activity levels, decreased concentration and attention, irritability, withdrawal, angry outbursts, aggression, changes in sleep and appetite, and lack of interest in their usual activities. They may also have more somatic complaints, such as body aches and pains, and sensitivity to loud noises.

## Common Reactions Among Teenagers

- ▶ Like young children, teenagers may experience concerns about themselves and others, and they may have worries about imminent tornados.
- ▶ Teenagers can also experience feelings of sadness, anger, and unjustness about the situation.
- ▶ They may also experience behavioral changes, such as difficulty sleeping and paying attention, and increased high-risk behaviors (for example, drinking, substance use, self-injurious behaviors).

## Helping Children

- ▶ Allow children and teenagers to express their feelings and discuss their experiences. Although recounting the experience with your children may be difficult, do your best to encourage them to share concerns and ask questions. Children may find it helpful to tell a story or play-act their experience during and after to cope with their experience.

- ▶ Media and news may portray many scary images and topics that may increase fears and anxiety in children. Limit their exposure to TV and the internet, and discuss their feelings about the news you watch with them.
- ▶ Children may also benefit from taking action related to the disaster to feel more in control of their situation. Some potential activities include volunteering to help others in a safe environment after a disaster. If you belong to a church or other social group, there may be opportunities to help others through volunteering with these groups.
- ▶ Help children develop a sense of structure and regularity by engaging in routine activities. This can include returning to school once it opens and continuing familiar family traditions (such as bedtime stories and prayer).
- ▶ Children can be clingier after a disaster because they are worried about separation; being with your child and reassuring them that you will stay together can be helpful. For when you must be apart, develop a plan so that your child knows how you will be reunited.

## Helping Teenagers

- ▶ Talk to teenagers about their feelings and experiences during and after the tornado. Some teenagers may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions, and discussing them can help them cope.
- ▶ Like children, teenagers may benefit from taking a break from media and social media messages about the tornado. Instead, they may like listening to music, playing games, or playing with pets.
- ▶ Teenagers can also take action by volunteering to help others or helping their parents with cleanup, repairs, or keeping younger children calm.

## Helping Youth at School and in Organizational Groups

- ▶ Teachers can help students by modifying lesson plans to reduce workload and working slowly. Students will recover along different timelines, and a revised curriculum may demonstrate patience and help students enjoy lessons. Simultaneously, teachers should keep a structured schedule with outlined rules to provide stability.

- ▶ Teachers and other leaders (for example, pastors, 4-H leaders, scout leaders) can help young people cope by discussing their feelings and concerns.
- ▶ Parents can provide information to teachers and other leaders about the tornado's impact on their child's personal life. Leaders can use this information to understand behavioral or performance changes at school and in other groups.
- ▶ Teachers and religious and organizational leaders can provide tips and skills for coping. Still, distressed youth should be encouraged to meet with counselors or social workers.
- ▶ It may be beneficial for adolescents to engage in activities that can help build a sense of community and citizenship—for example, working on projects to help others at school, in their group, or in the impacted community.
- ▶ Teachers and other leaders must take good physical and emotional care of themselves. Other teachers and colleagues may be a good source of support during this time.

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## Resources

### *Disaster Distress Helpline*

1-800-985-5990

### *SAMHSA's National Helpline*

1-800-662-HELP

### *National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline*

Call or text 988

Chat online at <https://988lifeline.org/chat>

### *Crisis Text Line*

Text "HOME" to 741741

### *Strength After*

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org>

### *Disaster Distress Helpline Online Peer Support Communities*

<https://strengthafterdisaster.org/peer-support>

### *National Alliance on Mental Illness HelpLine*

(Mon. to Fri. 10 a.m.–10 p.m. ET)

1-800-950-NAMI

Text "HelpLine" to 62640

### *Find treatment in your area for mental health and substance use:*

<https://findtreatment.gov/>

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