

# Pediatric Disaster Response Workshop

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Cascade Valley Hospital

Arlington, WA

## Quick Tips: Helping Kids and Teens Recover from Trauma and Loss

What do children need after a trauma or loss? In order to heal, children need to recover (1) their **trust** in others, (2) their sense of **safety and stability**, and (3) their sense of **control** (self-efficacy).

### 1. **Trust:** Children need honest answers and explanation

- Tell children what has happened. Children nearly always know any “bad news” at some level. Hiding information or lying to them makes it very difficult for them to trust. When children know that something bad has happened, but no one tells them the truth, they sometimes create a story which may be worse than the truth, for example, that their grandmother didn’t love them and left them without telling them vs. their grandmother became ill and died.
- Speak/explain simply and in language that is appropriate to the age.
- Reassure children that what happened was **not their fault**.
- Once news is given, do more listening than talking.

2. **Safety, Routine, and Stability:** Returning to routine after a bad event helps children to regain a sense of security. A sense of **safety** can be ensured by reuniting children with family, friends, and community if they have experienced a separation and if this can be accomplished safely. **Stability** and the sense of safety it can bring can come from maintaining or establishing, when possible, **routines**. Actions you can take would be to help children by providing:

- Consistent bedtime
- Family meals at regular times
- Attendance at school on time and regularly
- Stability also can come from the following:
- Provide a “quiet place” where they can escape from the visual chaos. This can be even just a screened off area or a quiet corner of a room.
- Include children in rituals such as funerals and wakes: Excluding children from these important events isolates them and makes it more difficult for them to accept what has happened. Furthermore, excluding children means they don’t see models for how adults grieve, and may give them the message that it’s not ok to express their sadness.
- Assign someone to be with a child and to monitor how children are coping. This person, if possible, should be someone who is not so grief-stricken that he or she cannot focus on the child.

### 3. **Control:** Children need adults to help them see their own strengths and ability to cope and manage.

To help them find control:

- Help them to begin to think forward. Ask them questions such as “What do you want to do as a career when you get older?” Help children to notice the ways that you have seen them be courageous or kind. Focus on any positive things, even if small. You might ask, “What was the best thing that happened today?” or “What was something you did today even though someone else might have been afraid?” or “Who did you help today?”

## Tool Kit for Children

### Relaxation Tricks for Young Children

#### “Bubble Breathing”

Buy bubbles which come with a wand. Have the child practice blowing the biggest bubbles they can. This needs slow, soft, steady breaths...which induces calm.

#### “Scrunches”

Have the child lie down on their back. They should curl up and make all muscles scrunch up as tight as possible, hold for a slow count to 3 and then relax them. Repeat this several times and then have the child check to make sure all his muscles are “loose and floppy” This is a great exercise to do right before bed.

### Relaxation Tricks for Ages 7 and up

Find a comfortable place to lie down

Keeping all the muscles of your body loose and relaxed, tighten up only your feet.

Count slowly to 3 and then relax

Then, keeping all the muscles in your body relaxed and loose, tighten up only the muscles in your legs.

Count slowly to 3 and relax.

Do this with arms/hands and then with face/head.

Once you’ve gone through all the muscle groups, check and make sure there are no tight muscles anywhere

Put one hand on your belly and one on your chest

Breathe in through your nose and out with your mouth, softly, slowly

As you breathe, make the belly hand rise up and down and try to keep the chest hand still

Closing your eyes, imagine a set of steps going down. Try to see them as clearly as you can. Are they wood? Painted? What color are they?

Imagine walking slowly down the steps and at each step imagine you become even more relaxed.

When you get to the bottom step, imagine a door. What does it look like?

Go through the door to a beautiful beach. The sky is blue and you have this part of the beach all to yourself. Picture your swim suit and towel.

Imagine lying down on the towel.

Feel the warm sun on your face, your chest and belly, the tops of your legs

Feel the warm sand beneath your towel, warming the back of your legs and back.

Imagine the warm sun rays melting any pain, any feelings of nervousness out of your stomach. You can imagine the fears and uncomfortable feelings just melting out and down into the sand.

Stay on the beach as long as you like. Once you’re finished, imagine going through the door, and up the stairs. Once you’re at the top, open your eyes, take a big breath and stretch.

Try to practice twice a day, once at bedtime.

## **Tool Kit for Teens and Adults**

### **Effective Listening**

Apply supportive communication and active listening skills

Remind them that you are concerned about their problem

- **Sitting or standing at a distance that the other person is comfortable with**
- **Awareness of tone and words**
- **Professional approach to offering support**
- **Ask open ended and clarifying questions**
- **Express empathy, understanding and compassion for the person and his or her situation**
- **Summarize the situation accurately**
- **Recognizing things that interfere**
- **Be respectful of the person you are working with at all times**
- **Focus on the person's experience and solutions, rather than blame**
- **Be supportive without commanding or directing**
- **Be aware of your personal judgments about the situation, and keep them out of the support relationship**

### **Support and Explore Resources**

Explore with the person the things that can make them stronger

- **Help the person identify internal strengths & external resources**
- **Focus on Connection with others, Acceptance of Change, and finding Purpose**
- **Focus on what has worked well for them in the past, what they know how to do, and skills they have applied with success**
- **Ask about things that give them peace, make them happy or relaxed**
- **If the problem is too severe, significant, or dangerous, refer the person to an appropriate community resource if possible**

### **Offer a Tool**

**1. TEACH RELAXATION** as a way to decrease the impact of stressors

**ASK the person to sit up straight in chair, opening lungs to fullest extent**

**DEMONSTRATE** slow deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, very slowly, five times.

**SUGGEST** that if they begin to feel anxious / dizzy / nervous etc, that they remove themselves from the situation if possible, and find a quiet corner, or a different place to practice the breathing

**RECOMMEND** that they do this at least twice per day, or more if needed.

**INFORM** them that with practice and time, they will master control over the anxiety, and it will not control them.

**2. TEACH THINKING STRATEGIES** to help the person avoid becoming stuck in negative thinking and behaving patterns

**STEPS: (“NICE”)**

Notice **your thoughts, feelings and behavior**

Identify **the feelings and behaviors you are connecting to the thoughts**

Choose a **new thought, feeling, or behavior**

Exercise **control, practice the new thought, feeling, or behavior**

**Examples:**

—**NOTICE AND IDENTIFY:**

-**Thought:** I am worried about another earthquake happening again

-**Feeling:** The worry makes me scared, and upset

-**Behavior:** When I feel scared and upset, I want to stay away from my friends and family

—**CHOOSE and EXERCISE:**

·**Thought:** Right now, there is not another earthquake. I am OK, I am safe.

·**Feeling:** Recognizing that I am OK and safe right now makes me feel more calm

·**Behavior:** Feeling calm right now will help me work or visit with family and friends; maybe I will go for a visit later

**3. PRACTICING NEW THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS**

—You are in control of the feelings and thoughts, they are not in charge of you

—Count slowly to 10, reminding yourself that you are OK, and safe, in the present moment

—Developing a healthy, regular routine is important in recovery. What can I plan to do tomorrow, or later this week that you will follow through on?

—When possible, control the worry by focusing on something pleasant in the present moment (a pretty color, a nice feeling fabric you are wearing, your relaxation breathing, a nice sound in the room, etc.)

—When possible, manage anxiety by focusing on others, for example, ask another person a question about themselves, comment on something another person is doing, or offer to help someone with something that needs to be done.

—Remind yourself that you are not alone. Many people feel anxious and act brave. Try it and see.

—Things heal with time, and over time, you will feel differently than you do today.

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