



Information for Parents on How to Help Your Child/Teen Cope with Stressful Events or Uncertainty

The most important thing that you can do to help your child/teen cope with stressful events is to remain as calm as possible when you are with him or her. Children pick up on their parents' anxiety very quickly. If they sense you are anxious, they will be anxious as well. Therefore, if you are having difficulty coping with a stressful situation, it is a good idea to reach out to resources to help yourself, such as friends, family members, support groups, clergy, or healthcare professionals. Taking care of your own stress so that you are less anxious will help your child to stay calm.

Recognize signs of anxiety/stress in your child.

- Children and teens typically regress when stressed. That is, they go back to doing things they did when younger to help themselves feel more comfortable and secure. For instance, a preschool child may go back to sucking his/her thumb and a school-age child or teen may act more dependent upon their parents or have difficulty separating from them.
- Other common signs of anxiety in young children include: Restlessness/hyperactivity, temper tantrums, nightmares, clinging behaviors, difficulty separating, and distress around new people.
- Common signs of anxiety in older school age-children and teens include: Difficulty concentrating and sleeping, anger, restlessness/ hyperactivity, worry, and physical complaints, such as stomach aches or headaches.
- At age 9 years, children realize that death is permanent. Fears of death or physical violence and harm are often common after this age.
- Signs and symptoms of anxiety such as these are usually healthy, temporary coping strategies that help your child to deal with stress. However, if these symptoms persist for several weeks or interfere with your child's functioning, talk to your child's primary health care provider about them. Your child's doctor or nurse practitioner will know what to do to help.

Be honest and give age and developmentally appropriate explanations about stressful events when they occur.

- For young children (under 8 years of age), only provide answers to questions they are asking and do not overwhelm them with too much detail. Use language that young children can understand. Do not expose young children to visual images that are terrifying in the newspapers or television.

- It may be easier for young children to express how they are feeling by asking them to talk about how their stuffed animals or dolls are feeling or thinking.
- Help children and teens to express how they are feeling about what they have seen or heard. If children have difficulty verbally expressing their feelings, ask them to make a drawing about how they are feeling. Older school-age children and teens can benefit from writing about how they feel.
- Ask your child/teen, “What is the scariest or worst thing about this event for you?” or “What is worrying you the most right now?” and take time to really listen to what they have to say.
- Reassure children that they did nothing wrong to cause what happened. Toddlers and preschool children especially feel guilty when stressful events happen.
- Tell children and teens that what they are feeling (e.g., anger, anxiety, helplessness) is normal and that others feel the same way.
- Decrease anxiety in your child by reassuring him or her that you will get through this together. Emphasize that adults are doing everything possible to take care of the stressful situation and that they are not alone.
- Help your child/teen to release tension by encouraging daily physical exercise and activities.
- Continue to provide as much structure to your child’s schedules and days as possible.
- Recognize that added stress/anxiety usually increases psychological or physical symptoms (e.g., headaches or abdominal pain) in children/teens who are already anxious or depressed.
- Young children who are depressed typically have different symptoms (e.g., restlessness, excessive motor activity) than older school-age children or teens who are depressed (e.g., sad or withdrawn affect; anger, difficulty sleeping or eating; talking about feeling hopeless).
- Use this opportunity as a time to work with your child on their coping skills (e.g., relaxation techniques, positive reappraisal, prayer). Children watch how their parents cope and often take on the same coping strategies. Therefore, showing your child that you use positive coping strategies to deal with stress will help him or her to develop healthy ways of coping.
- Be sure to have your child or teen seen by a healthcare provider or mental health professional for signs or symptoms of persistent anxiety, depression, recurrent pain, persistent behavioral changes, or if they have difficulty maintaining their routine schedules.
- Remember that stressful times can be an opportunity to build future coping and life skills as well as bring your family closer together.

This handout may be photocopied (but not altered) and distributed to families. From Melnyk, B.M. & Moldenhauer, Z: The KySS Guide to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Screening,

Early Intervention and Health Promotion, 2006, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners and the NAPNAP Foundation, Cherry Hill, NJ.