Babies, young children and crisis

Stress caused by crisis or disasters can contribute to parents, babies and young children feeling unsafe and insecure.

Babies and young children are particularly vulnerable and can easily become distressed.

It is through their relationships with their parents and other caring adults that babies and young children are able to manage their distress.

This will, in turn, help to limit any long term impact on their physical development and emotional wellbeing.

The relationship between a parent and their baby or young child becomes even more important while they are recovering from crisis.

Looking after your baby or young child

Common physical and emotional reactions experienced by babies and young children when they are distressed include:

- increased clinging, crying and whining
- greater fear of separation from parents
- more withdrawn and harder to engage
- may eat less or more
- difficulty sleeping
- harder to settle and soothe.

Additionally, young children may also:

- be more easily frustrated and have more tantrums
- be more aggressive
- engage in play that acts out scary events
- have nightmares
- lose previous skills, e.g. toileting, talking.

If your baby or young child continues to experience any of the above symptoms which causes you difficulty or concern, don’t wait, seek professional help.

Always seek professional help if your baby or young child:

- has significant weight loss
- has an ongoing lack of appetite or is over-eating
- lacks eye contact or is listless
- lacks interest in other people
- appears watchful or worried
- stops talking
- lacks curiosity in the world around them
- has ongoing sleep and settling difficulties.

As babies and young children do not always have the words to tell you what they need or how they feel, they will rely on you to help them feel safe and understand how they feel.

After a crisis, usual routines are often disrupted which can affect your baby’s or young child’s physical and emotional needs being met. To limit any impact:

- look after yourself—if you are stressed they may also be stressed
- re-establish familiar routines as soon as possible
- think about their emotional needs
- make time to spend time with them
- be patient with them and have reasonable expectations
- be aware of signs that could indicate that they are distressed.

Communicate and connect with your baby or young child

When you communicate and connect with your baby or young child, you help them to feel safe, understood and close to you. This could include:

- taking time to connect with them individually
- talking to them
- remembering they can communicate their feelings through their behaviour
- thinking about what they are trying to communicate to you and what they might need you to do
- helping them have fun - play allows them to relieve their stress and connect with their parents to feel safe
- making up your own fun with them.

Activities to do with your baby or young child

Inside activities

- Draw
- Play peek-a-boo
- Play with construction toys and blocks
- Sing nursery rhymes or songs together, and add actions, movement or dance
- Do craft together – gluing, cutting, constructing, stickers, etc.
- Read books
- Visit the library.
Outside activities

- Play ball games
- Go for a walk or to the park
- Listen to different sounds, e.g. birds, cars, footsteps, animal noises
- Find different surfaces to walk on, e.g. lawn, gravel, leaves
- Look for insects, lizards and frogs
- Blow bubbles
- Arrange a play date with friends
- Have a picnic in a garden or park.

Looking after yourself helps you look after your child

Looking after yourself can be as simple as:

- being kind to yourself and having reasonable expectations
- breaking tasks down into smaller manageable tasks
- scheduling time for yourself (without your child if possible), maybe to:
  - watch a movie
  - read a book or magazine
  - keep a journal
  - have a bath or shower
- going out for a coffee
- trying to get enough sleep or rest
- congratulating yourself on small achievements
- accepting help from others.

Seek help if necessary

Seeking help might feel hard, but it is the best thing you can do for yourself, your baby or young child, and your family.

Telephone and support services

General

- Your local doctor (general practitioner)
- Lifeline (24 hours) 13 11 14
- beyondblue Information Line 1300 22 4636
- Relationships Australia 1300 364 277

Adults

- Post and Antenatal Depression Association (PANDA) 1300 726 306
- Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline (24 hours) 1800 88 2436
- Women’s Health Queensland Wide Inc. (07) 3839 9988 or 1800 017 676 (outside Brisbane)
- Mensline Australia (24 Hours) 1300 789 978

Children

- Your local Child and Youth Mental Health Service (Monday–Friday) including Recovery Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)™
- Parent Line (8am-10pm daily) 1300 30 1300
- Kids Help Line (24 hours) 1800 55 1800

On the web

- Queensland Health www.health.qld.gov.au
- Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health www.health.qld.gov.au/qcpimh
- Post and Antenatal Depression Association www.panda.org.au
- Information on depression and anxiety www.beyondblue.org.au www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
- Information about mental health and well-being www.ontrack.org.au
- National Children of Parents of Mental Illness www.copmi.net.au
- Information about baby and toddler behaviour www.zerotothree.org
- Information about mothers and babies www.mothersmatter.co.nz
- Activities to help children cope www.sesameworkshop.org/initiative
- Raising Children Network www.raisingchildren.net.au
- Australian Government Disaster Assist www.disasterassist.gov.au
- Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au