Coping as a family through crisis

After a crisis or disaster, it is common for people to feel overwhelmed or have an emotional reaction to the event.

As a parent, you may worry you are not coping as well as you “should”, and have concerns about your children and the best way to support your family.

It is very important to recognise the strengths in yourself and your family, talk about concerns as a family, and recognise when you need additional support.

Understanding your own needs

Looking after your family means looking after yourself as well. Parents also need help and support, especially during stressful times.

While many people recover relatively quickly after a crisis, some may continue to experience emotional distress. Some people may develop depression, anxiety or other mental health problems following a crisis. This presents challenges if you are a parent.

Being able to identify your needs and get the assistance you need can help reduce distress. Recognising the need for assistance and seeking treatment will aid in achieving recovery and the development of resilience.

Family relationships and supports

During and following times of crisis, connect with your support network—family members, friends or other community networks.

Communicating with family and friends after a crisis can be very helpful for you and your family. You may find that there are other networks you could develop in your community that can provide support.

Understanding your child’s strengths and areas of difficulty

Focusing and building on the strengths of children and adolescents, as well as maintaining the usual family routines, are important to assisting them to cope and recover.

Children’s emotions or behaviour often change in response to the crisis as they try to make sense of their experiences. Infants or toddlers may also show signs of stress, such as changes in feeding or sleeping, and difficulties settling.

Often these reactions will resolve without specific treatment, however if they persist it is important to seek help.

You may find your usual parenting strategies are less effective during this time. Finding ways to help children of all ages make sense of their experiences is valuable, through talking, story telling or play.

It can be helpful to talk to your child’s teacher or child care worker about what is happening for your family and discuss how your child is coping. There may be other important adults in your child’s life who can offer additional support.

Talking as a family

After a crisis, families cope best when there is communication about thoughts and feelings related to what has happened.

Often when people are stressed they communicate less, which may lead to more uncertainty or conflict within the family.

Without communication, children and adolescents become confused. They may worry if a parent is stressed or irritable. It is important that communication within the family continues.

Hints for supporting infants, children and adolescents

- For infants and young children keep them close, comfort them and maintain routines
- Encourage children and adolescents to talk about the things they may have seen and heard. Use story telling with young children.
- Make sure any answers or explanations are appropriate to their age.
- Talk about the problems you may face as a family, as well as possible solutions
- Make them aware that there is hope that the situation will improve.
- Encourage them to focus on their life – school, relationships, interests, etc.
- Tell them it is okay to talk to other adults about their worries and concerns.
- Discuss how you can work together around the household chores.
- If you or any other family member is experiencing emotional difficulty, talk to your child about what they may have observed, tell them their family member will get better with support.
Experiencing joy as a family

Even though your family's circumstances may have changed as a result of a crisis, it is important to continue to experience joy as a family.

If you are feeling stressed, it may be a struggle to enjoy certain activities or to keep doing the things you previously did as a family. This can be difficult in the busy time after a crisis but is valuable for recovery.

Consider planning enjoyable activities for you and your family. It could be as simple as being with the children while they play, going to the park together or planning a family outing.

Making a plan to meet your family’s needs

Making a plan to build on your family's strengths and address concerns can be very helpful for your family, especially after experiencing a crisis.

You may be able to do this alone as a family, or you may wish to access available resources that can help you do this. You may also have concerns you would like to discuss with a health professional or other support person.

Knowing what help is available can be very important for supporting your family.

If you are a parent experiencing difficulties recovering

You may have additional questions related to supporting your family during this time. Getting treatment and giving yourself time for recovery is not easy when you are also looking after your family.

It is important to talk to your health professional or support worker about any concerns you may have for your children. There is information and resources available for parents with mental illness to assist in supporting their family through services for Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI).

Getting help

The most important thing to remember is that you, your family and your community are not alone. Support is available through a number of Queensland Government agencies and community organisations.

There are a number of ways to seek help for distress related to emergencies.

- Lifeline (13 11 14)
  Lifeline Australia maintains a 24 hour telephone counselling service and information, referral and associated services in local areas.

- Australian Red Cross (1800 733 111)
  Visit the ‘Resources’ section of the website at www.redcross.org.au/emergencyresources or contact Red Cross on 1800 733 111.

- National COPMI (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness) Initiative
  The national COPMI initiative aims to promote better mental health outcomes for children (aged 0 to 18 years) of parents with a mental health problem or disorder. For resources and more information, call (08) 8367 0999 or email copmi@aicafmha.net.au.

- Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (QCPIMH)
  The QCPIMH is a statewide hub of expertise in perinatal and infant mental health. For more information call (07) 3266 3100 or email pimh@health.qld.gov.au

- Brisbane COPMI services
  - Koping Program - Brisbane North  3266 3100
  - KOPMI - Brisbane South  3163 8650

- Help and more information may also be obtained from your general practitioner, local community health centre or local mental health service.

- You can also refer to the White Pages telephone directory for available services.

References
