

## CARING FOR CHILDREN DURING AN ADVERSE SITUATION

### Common reactions of children to adverse situations:

When we go through a disturbing event, where our life is at risk, it is possible that our body reacts in a different way than we are used to. Some common reactions that children may have are:

- Physical complaints, such as headaches and stomach aches
- Changes in appetite
- Difficulty sleeping due to nightmares or night terrors, which may cause them to scream at night
- Difficulty concentrating on any activity
- Fear
- Concern for the present and the future
- Behaviors from when they were younger, such as wetting the bed, clinging to their parents or not wanting to be alone, crying frequently, thumb sucking, among others.
- Agitation and aggressiveness
- Shyness and isolation



## What we can do to help the children in our care:

All of the reactions listed above are common, and when a child has one of them, it does not necessarily mean that they should see a psychologist or a psychiatrist, or that he needs medication because most children learn to deal with the situation, recover well and feel safe again if their basic needs are met and if they can count on the care and attention of their loved ones.

We can help children understand and control their reactions by talking to them in a gentle way, trying not to get angry or punish them, as this can make them feel bad and make their reactions more serious.

Setting a routine for children can help lessen their worry, and spending time with them, playing or reading stories, too.

## Ideas for games to play with the kids:



- **Clap and Catch:** Throw an imaginary ball to another person by sliding one hand over the other making a clapping sound (once). The person receiving it also grabs the imaginary ball with a clapping sound (once). In order to be able to pass the ball, the person who throws must first make eye contact. The goal is to establish a rhythm for the group. Encourages group connection.
- **Balloons with faces:** Balloons of different colours stuffed with flour. Draw faces that represent different feelings/emotions. Form a circle and ask the children to make their own impressions of the faces on the balloons.
- **Cards to breathe:** Draw different geometric shapes on a card. Children have to follow each line with ta finger, inhaling and exhaling.

## What we can do to help the children in our care:

Children can handle a situation better when they feel they can help others, so we can provide opportunities for them to feel needed and important. It is also important to praise them when they do something good and useful, no matter how small the action is.

Sometimes a child may misbehave because they do not understand what we want them to do. We can try to give clear and specific instructions about certain activities, and thank them when they behave the way we asked them to. Children learn by observing what the adults they are surrounded with do. This is why it is important that we demonstrate which behaviours are desirable through our own actions, remembering that we do not need to be a perfect caregiver every time. Learning new ways of acting or communicating takes time.

We can give children truthful information about what is going on. We can change the words we use depending on their ages to make sure they understand and can handle the facts, but we don't need to give them more information than what they need to know. When talking to a child, it is important to pay attention to them and make eye contact, because this helps them feel safe and confident.

We can ask how they feel and let them share what they want, trying to listen and understand their feelings. Remember we should not force or pressure them to talk about the upsetting event they went through because that can make them feel really bad. There is no wrong or bad way to feel or express our feelings, so it is important that we let the child cry, for example, otherwise he may feel alone and misunderstood. We can help children understand that feeling sad is part of life, for example, that adults also have strong emotions at times, and that this can be controlled when we take time to calm down, talk and share how we feel with each other.





## When to seek extra help:

We should seek professional help if the child has:

- Very serious or long-lasting reactions (more than a month after the upsetting event, for example)
- If he/she is unable to do usual daily activities
- If the child is hurting him/herself or talking about getting hurt Expressed thoughts about harming others
- If he/she is having difficulty getting along with people
- If he/she is having frightening memories or nightmares about the upsetting event
- If he/she increasingly avoids anything that reminds him/her of the disturbing event
- If reactions to the risk situation get worse over time rather than better



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