

Tips for teachers and parents – supporting young people

When a large earthquake happens, everyone’s feeling of safety is undermined. Reassure young people that you will help keep them safe whether this is at school, or at home. You can help by re-establishing daily routines as soon as possible and providing comfort when needed.

Children and young people might become confused and fearful and they might not be able to understand or process their feelings. Helping them feel safe takes time and patience and reassurance from the important adults in their lives. When children are anxious, such as during or after an event like an earthquake, they might want to be with people who help them feel safe and they might worry when they are not together.

How do children react and what should I do?

All children and young people are different and will show stress in different ways. It is common for children and young people to revert to behaviours they have previously grown out of, such as becoming clingy or needing extra adult attention.

How children and young people react will depend on their experience of the earthquake, their age, their understanding of what happened, parental support, the degree of change and loss and their exposure to media.

The chart below lists some common concerns or issues experienced by young people and describes how parents, caregivers or teachers can respond.

Remember, if you need practical help or someone to talk to right now, contact:

- Government Earthquake Line, 0800 779 997
- Counselling and Family Support, 0800 777 846
- Relationship Services, 0800 735 283.

Concern/issue	Responses	Tips
<i>Wanting to be alone, feeling guilty or shamed about how they reacted.</i>	<p>Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings.</p> <p>Emphasise that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.</p>	<p>Say, “Many kids and adults feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they couldn’t do more.”</p> <p>Say, “You’re not at fault. Remember, everyone who came to help us and are helping us. There was nothing we could have done differently.”</p>

Concern/issue	Responses	Tips
<p><i>Self-consciousness about their fears; sense of vulnerability; afraid of some things or going outside; fear of being labeled abnormal.</i></p>	<p>Help teens understand that these feelings are common.</p> <p>Encourage relationships with family/whānau and peers for support needed during the recovery period.</p>	<p>Say, “I was feeling the same thing – scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when an earthquake happens, even if they look calm on the outside.”</p> <p>“My mobile phone is working again, why don’t you see if you can get hold of Pete to see how he’s doing. And thanks for playing the game with your little sister – she’s much better now.”</p>
<p><i>Acting out behaviour. Using alcohol, driving recklessly and other accident-prone behaviour.</i></p>	<p>Help teens understand that acting out behaviour is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. Limit access to alcohol. Talk about the danger of high-risk activity. Have them let you know where they are going and what they’re planning to do.</p>	<p>Say, “Many teens and some adults feel out of control and angry after an earthquake like this. They think drinking will help somehow. It’s very normal to feel that way, but it’s not a good idea to act on it. It’s important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you.”</p> <p>Assure your teen that this extra checking in is temporary, just until things have stabilised.</p>
<p><i>Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders.</i></p>	<p>Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders and images on phones, web sites etc that occur after it. Explain to teens that pictures and images of the earthquake can trigger fears of it happening again.</p>	<p>Say, “We need to keep practicing our drills and remember our safety plan.”</p>
<p><i>Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships. Teens might pull away from parents, family/whānau and even from peers. They might respond strongly to parents’ reactions in the crisis.</i></p>	<p>Explain that the strain on relationships is expected.</p> <p>Emphasise that we need family/whānau and friends for support during the recovery period. Encourage tolerance for different family/whānau members’ reactions and ways of recovering. Accept responsibility for your own feelings.</p>	<p>Spend more time talking as a family/whānau about how everyone is doing. Say, “You know, the fact that we’re crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we’ve been through. I think we’re handling things amazingly. It’s a good thing we have each other.” You might say, “I appreciate your being calm when your brother was screaming last night. I know he woke you up too. I want to apologise for being irritable with you yesterday. I’m going to work harder to stay calm myself.”</p>

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<i>Radical changes in attitude.</i>	Explain that changes in people's attitudes after an earthquake are common, but will return to normal over time.	Say, "We're all under great stress. When people's lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry and even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we will all feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."
<i>Wanting premature entrance into adulthood (eg, wanting to leave school, get married).</i>	Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to help your teen feel more in control of things.	Say, "I know you're thinking about quitting school and getting a job to help out. But it's important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis time is not a great time to make major changes."
<i>Concern for other victims and families/whānau.</i>	Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undue responsibility.	Allow teens to participate in cultural and religious grieving rituals. Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (eg, clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).

Source: *Psychological First Aid Operations Guide*, 2006.
<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/manuals/psych-first-aid.asp>