



PHOENIX
AUSTRALIA
Centre for Posttraumatic
Mental Health



Parenting: coping with crisis



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Cover (top to bottom): Australian Red Cross/
Conor Ashleigh, Dilini Perera, Dilini Perera.

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1 Introduction

Emergencies and crises by their very nature are disruptive and can be stressful.

It's normal to have a range of feelings in reaction to a challenging situation. With time and some simple steps, most people cope well with the stress of a crisis.

This booklet provides reflections on and suggestions for parenting during or after a disaster or crisis. Parenting at these times can be overwhelming, and different strategies will work for different people.

Remember:

- Not all situations and recommendations will apply to you and your family
 - You do not have to do everything at once.
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See the back of this booklet for some resources and supports to help you understand your child's reactions and help them cope. There is also information available to help you understand your own response and that of your family to stress, trauma and grief.



Australian Red Cross/Conor Ashleigh



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2 Coping with crisis while parenting

Parenting can feel very different during or after a crisis:

- the regular challenges of parenting can feel more difficult
- daily routines are upset or non-existent and can be hard to get back to.
- children may behave, communicate and respond differently due to stress, loss or trauma
- strategies that used to work with your children, like managing tantrums, or reassuring them in stressful situations, may not work in the same way, or at all
- your usual supports – family members, friends, the school community and local organisations – might not be accessible or available
- isolation is a common feeling for people experiencing crisis or disaster, but there are supports available.

It is normal for parenting at this time to seem harder or even overwhelming. That may feel like a loss in itself. If you really enjoyed parenting before and felt on top of things, that may change. For a time, parenting might feel more deliberate, less intuitive. You might find parenting motivating, comforting or rewarding during or after a crisis. The experience will be different for everyone and it can also change over time.

Parenting is different for everyone

The demands of your particular situation and the different ways your children and family react to stress and trauma will inform how you cope during or following a crisis. Every child and every family has their own strengths and vulnerabilities. How many children you have, their ages, cultural considerations, if anyone is living with a disability, and/or has additional needs, if your family experiences discrimination, and whether you are a single parent or a blended family can also shape this experience, and it might be very different to that of other parents you know.

Family members can have different views about what is required to help children cope. You may have been in sync with your partner before, and find you now have different ideas about how to support and parent your children.



3 Getting through it

Recovery takes time, it can be more like a marathon than a sprint. It often takes a very deliberate effort to resist some of the urgency to sprint, especially in the early days and weeks.

Knowing that recovery can take a long time – *a time that one day both you and your child will look back on as a considerable period of your lives* – could help you feel more comfortable about prioritising everyday aspects of family life during or following a crisis.

Finding your new normal

Many people feel driven to ‘get back to normal’ as soon as possible. This can be difficult because it is likely things won’t go back to exactly how they were. That doesn’t mean things won’t come to feel normal again.

Think about ways to connect your family with familiar items or occasions such as:

- family traditions and everyday activities (maybe in a new location, maybe with some minor changes)
- replacing or recreating items or events that were lost or unable to go ahead
- placing photos around that family or friends might have stored digitally.

Routines are a key way to bring a sense of stability. If you are not able to re-establish previous routines, start building new ones with your children. For example:

- read them a story before bed every night
- eat dinner together
- go to bed at the same time every day.

The ‘little things’ families value are important

Daily family rituals or activities that you really want to do with your children can seem small compared to all the other tasks that need to be done during or following a crisis. But the value of the ‘little things’ should not be underestimated. They are important parts of family life that can help you and your family get through difficult times. They can help:

- restore your sense of normal family life.
- create new memories of this time in your life. You might find that it means a lot to create some happy memories from this challenging period.
- you and your children feel more settled, calmer, and closer to normal. Doing activities together can create a comfortable space to talk and for children to feel close and connected to you.

The 'little things' might be:

- playing games
- reading books
- going for a walk or to the park
- cooking
- growing plants
- watching movies
- doing crafts, sewing, carpentry. What you make can help make living spaces feel more familiar.
- singing and/or dancing to music
- just being silly.

The challenge of 'looking after yourself'

A key recommendation for helping children cope is for you to focus on and care for yourself. This can be difficult to prioritise, particularly when it can seem like other things might help your children more directly.

Remember: Giving your mind and body a break will help give you energy to tune in to your children and partner, and complete the many tasks you want or need to do. Try following the advice you would give your best friend if they were in the same situation as you. We are often kinder to others than ourselves.

Practical tip: Lean on friends and family. Where possible, organise events where adults spend time together while children play, like a playdate or picnic. Where distance is an issue, organise video or phone calls with loved ones.

The challenge of managing emotions

It is normal to feel a range of emotions during or following a crisis. Finding ways to express emotions can be particularly difficult for parents. Sometimes it seems like suppressing or shutting down emotions might be the only way to function day-to-day and a practical way to help foster a calm and stable environment in the home.

Some parents worry that if they take time out to deal with challenging emotions, they may not be able to set them aside when they need to function on a practical level. However, not addressing troubling emotions can lead them to intensify and become even harder to manage later.

Experiencing strong emotions, or reacting suddenly and intensely to what usually seem to be quite minor issues are common responses to stress and trauma. This can be distressing for children to experience themselves, and to see in their parents. This is part of the reason looking after yourself is so important.

During or after a crisis, you, or someone you love may struggle with patience and tolerance. Intense emotions such as anger, fear and sadness can seem uncontrollable at times and flow through relationships between partners or between parents and their children.

If you are struggling with your own reactions, sometimes it can be as simple as stopping in the middle of a conversation or argument, taking a deep breath or removing yourself from the situation.

You might:

- go to another room
- go for a walk
- focus on something specific to settle yourself such as counting the flowers in a vase, or pushing your toes down to the floor for five seconds then relaxing for five seconds and repeating.

Sometimes it just isn't that simple. You might want to talk to someone, such as a health or mental health professional, particularly if you are finding that:

- your own or your partner's behaviour is of concern to you, if it has become aggressive, violent, threatening or withdrawn
- aspects of yours or your partner's behaviour have become more intense or frequent than usual

- you or they are reacting strongly to your children's behaviour.

There are services available to support you to manage these challenges. You may wish to ask questions, share your experience or worries, and talk through strategies to help you manage. If you, or someone you know needs support, reach out to these services:

- **Relationships Australia**
ph: 1300 364 277
www.relationships.org.au
- **1800 Respect**
ph: 1800 7377328
www.1800respect.org.au
- **Kids Helpline**
ph: 1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au

Children and young people are often aware of their parents' emotions including any arguing or aggression between parents. They do not have to witness an argument, as they may overhear or sense that something is wrong.

- talk to your children about how you feel and how your behaviour is a response to stress, and whether or not it was appropriate. This is important as children, including the very young, might feel as though it is their fault.

- make plans with neighbours, or friends and family to provide a safe place for your children to go, possibly at short notice, if you are struggling.
- if you are worried or have a ‘gut feeling’ things are not going well for your child and/ or your relationship, you can enlist a trusted friend or professional to help.

Wanting to be a good parent

Parenting can be hard at the best of times, let alone during and after a crisis. Being overloaded by demands, dealing with strong, unpredictable emotions and needing to adapt and respond to new situations can leave people feeling like an inadequate parent.

When you feel like this, it can seem really hard to talk to other parents or professionals. This can leave you feeling isolated. During or after a crisis, some of the supports your family normally relies on can be unavailable, which adds to this feeling of isolation.

Research tells us that doing the best you can doesn’t mean you have to aim for perfection, and you don’t have to do it all on your own. Drawing on reinforcements, particularly when you are feeling worn down or overloaded, will help support you and your child.

- if you don’t feel up to talking to your child at a particular time about the traumatic event, you can let them know and direct them to a trusted auntie, uncle, friend, sports coach or professional to answer questions and have the full conversation.

- if you are unable to access your usual supports, you could seek out online support groups for parents coping with similar challenges, or even start one.

Remember: Parenting isn’t about perfection, it’s about relationships and connection.

You may already have relationships you can turn to for support, but it can also help to make new connections. Sometimes people have conflicted feelings about ‘seeking help’. You might think that others need the support more than you, or if you’re a single parent, you may have worked very hard to be independent, and inviting support in might feel like a compromise. The old adage, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ might help. Disasters, stress, loss and trauma by their very nature can overwhelm our usual capacity and supports – it is never too early or too late to ask for help. Other people going through the same event or similar events in the past may welcome an opportunity to help.



Remember: For the majority of children (and adults), the intense or difficult feelings, thoughts, and behaviours, often described as symptoms of a traumatic experience, will gradually decrease over time and eventually resolve. This can happen on its own or with the support of family and friends. There are also formal supports available to you.

Your understanding of, support for, and relationship with your children can help them cope with difficult times. The experience of overcoming a traumatic event may equip them to face life's challenges in the future.

4 Helpful resources

Resource	Who is this for	Brief overview
Australian Red Cross Coping with a major personal crisis www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/6ba3063e-426a-44c8-8239-b8179bec9185/Coping-with-a-major-personal-crisis-booklet.pdf.aspx	People needing information, support or advice following a crisis	It's normal to have a range of feelings in reaction to an abnormal situation. This booklet contains information about some of the reactions and suggests ways to cope after an emergency.
Australian Red Cross Helping Children and young people cope with crisis www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/83e409b3-27db-4902-9f05-7dfdb2aee9b8/Helping-Children-and-Young-People-Cope-with-Crisis-2020.pdf.aspx	Parents and carers of children and young people	This booklet is designed to help parents understand why and how children might react to challenging and overwhelming experiences and help parents respond to the needs of their children.
Australian Red Cross After the emergency www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/3f02c687-efff-480b-9f0b-f44f004e51a9/after-the-emergency-kids-booklet.pdf.aspx	Children aged 5-8 years	This book enables children to think about what has happened and be aware of the feelings they may have after an emergency. You can use this book as a tool to discuss with children how they may be feeling.
Beyond Blue www.beyondblue.org.au	People wanting information and support for anxiety, stress and depression	Free tips and resources to help you look after your mental health, or support your loved ones.
Birdie's Tree www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/natural-disaster-recovery/	Children aged 0-5 years	Illustrated stories, therapeutic games and resources to help children aged 0-5 years understand different emergencies and work through their feelings.

Resource	Who is this for	Brief overview
Headspace www.headspace.org.au	People aged 12-25, or those caring for them	Resources, information and support for people aged 12-25 and those caring for them.
Kids Helpline 1800 551 800 www.kidshelpline.com.au	Young people aged 5-25 years	A free and confidential phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years.
Lifeline 13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au	People in need of crisis support, for them or their loved ones	A free 24-hour crisis support line to support people and prevent suicide.
Mindspot Clinic 1800 61 44 34 www.mindspot.org.au	Adults	A free online and telephone clinic providing assessment and treatment services for adults with anxiety and depression.
Phoenix Australia (Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health) www.phoenixaustralia.org	Children or teenagers who have been through a traumatic experience	Resources and information for parents to help their children after a traumatic event.
Relationships Australia 1300 364 277 www.relationships.org.au	Everyone	Leading provider of relationship support services for individuals, families and communities.
1800 Respect 1800 7377328 www.1800respect.org.au	Everyone	Free confidential information, counselling and support service.
Smiling Mind www.smilingmind.com.au	Everyone	A free mobile phone application of guided mindfulness meditations with special programs for children, young people, families, and adults.

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CASCOM Centre
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