



Keeping Family Relationships Strong during Tough Times

It's normal for families to have difficulties during stressful events or tough times.

Most families can become stronger following tough or challenging times, but first you need to understand and deal with any issues that may emerge over the coming weeks or months.

Below are some common reactions a family may experience following tough or challenging times like we are currently experiencing with the COVID-19 Pandemic. They can be immediate, or happen in the medium term or long term.

Immediate effects

Some reactions may happen immediately after following tough or challenging times and continue for a few weeks, including:

- Being afraid for each other's safety away from home (fear of infection, contagion or unspecified risk)
- Nightmares or fear that another disaster will occur
- Anger about the fear and distress the current event(s) has caused
- Anger directed at another family member or at people outside the family
- Loss of trust and confidence in themselves and other people
- Emotional turmoil, anger, guilt, sadness, unpredictable behaviour or unreasonable reactions
- Insecurity in children shown through behaviour such as bed wetting, changes in eating and sleeping habits or reverting to behaviour they have outgrown
- Difficulty communicating because family members don't know what to say to each other or don't feel like talking.

Medium term effects

Changes which are not obviously related to the recent events or challenging times can happen weeks or months after the index event. These changes can include:

- Spouses/parents may be irritable or intolerant, leading to friction and misunderstanding between themselves and their children
- Children and teenagers can begin to seek attention or act disobediently which usually means they are anxious or fearful
- Family members' feelings for each other may change as they become more detached or preoccupied with their own problems and reactions
- Family members may try too hard to help others and ignore their own needs

- Family members' work or school performance and concentration levels may suffer
- Spouses' sexual relationship may change
- Family members may lose interest in leisure, recreation, sport or social activities
- Teenagers may look outside the family for emotional support
- Immediate post event responses may continue or appear for the first time.

Long term effects

Sometimes problems become evident for the first time, months or years after the index events, and often appear as everyday issues.

Problems can include:

- Memories of the events may come back if family members are involved in another crisis, or may triggered by other emotional events,
- Family members often need to go over the events—perhaps for months or years—to better understand what has happened,
- People may find future medical or similar events harder to handle, particularly when similar feelings are triggered,
- Family members may hide painful feelings until things have returned to normal, and only then show their distress,
- Immediate or medium term effects may occur as delayed reactions or may become habits.

Helpful things to do

These issues are all normal reactions to an event or series or events that has affected the whole family in different ways.

A few ways to help your family recover after a disaster include:

- Keep communicating—talk about what is happening, how you each feel and you need from each other to avoid feeling alone, isolated and misunderstood
- Share real, factual, information—children, teenagers and toddlers know something is going on and the reality is easier to deal with than the unknown
- Do things together— make time for fun
- Keep family roles clear — don't let children to take on too much responsibility for too long. Understand if a family member can't fulfil their role and talk about how they will resume it when they are ready
- Be active—tackle problems, seek help, seek information and don't let issues develop
- Express emotions—support distressed family members and give them time to understand their feelings
- Validate everyone's emotional experiences including your own
- Seek external support—keep in contact with support groups, other family, friends, neighbours and workmates
- Make sure your family doesn't become isolated even when required to do so

When to seek help

- Communication in the family is breaking down
- Parents don't seem to recognize or understand their children's (or each other's) behaviour
- Things aren't improving over time
- A family member's emotional health is deteriorating
- Family members don't enjoy being together.

Contact Relationship Matters

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