

# Helping a **Child** Recover From the Emotional Toll of **THE COVID-19 DISASTER**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a state of disaster in our communities, leaving lives changed and futures uncertain. Even if your family has not suffered directly from the coronavirus, no one who experiences a disaster is untouched by it.

For many, a disaster continues as a very real presence even long after it has passed. Feelings of sadness, depression, frustration, anger, and anxiety are common. It is not unusual for these feelings to last for many

months. Learning to recognize the normal reactions and emotions that occur can help you better understand these feelings and become more comfortable and effective in coping with them.

The following information explains the range of feelings and behaviors you can expect from your children and how you can best help them during this time of recovery. Suggestions for coping are offered throughout this document.



## **TO HELP YOUR CHILD DEAL WITH THE LOSS OF SECURITY AND FEEL MORE SECURE, THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO**

Acknowledge and respect your child's fear and losses; allow your child to grieve about the loss of direct contact with friends, classmates, teachers, and loved ones. Encourage your child to talk about how they feel—what they are afraid of. Make time for extra hugs and touch in general. Try to spend extra time together in family activities to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.

## **CHILDREN REACT DIFFERENTLY TO TRAUMA AND STRESSFUL EVENTS THAN ADULTS DO**

Their responses may be delayed or difficult to detect, especially children who have a history of acting out or who may be suffering with depression, which tends to produce symptoms of withdrawal and silent suffering. It is important to understand that younger children do pick up on the fears and concerns of the adults in their lives.

## **STAY WELL**

**[Michigan.gov/StayWell](https://Michigan.gov/StayWell)**

Eliminate stressors whenever possible. This is easy to say and much harder to do. However, parents and caregivers can work together to reduce stress by doing such things as making sure children eat right, get plenty of rest, slow down, have time to talk about issues and concerns, and avoid inappropriate television programming.

**Stay Well Counseling available through COVID-19 hotline.**

**Dial 1-888-535-6136  
(Press "8")**



*The Stay Well Crisis Counseling and Training Program is funded by a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant and directed by emergency behavioral health staff within the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Brochure content adapted from FEMA, the Center for Mental Health Services, and Victim Services of the Texas Department of Public Safety.*

## THINGS TO LOOK FOR

### In children ages 5 and younger you may notice the following:

More clingy behavior • Fear of separation from parents or caregivers • Agitation, acting out, or bouts of crying • Behavioral regression such as bedwetting or baby talk • Difficulty with sleeping or nightmares • Appetite changes • Avoidance of any reminders of the trauma

### In children ages 6–11 you may notice these feelings, behaviors, and experiences:

Repetitious play in which the child goes over and over the trauma events • Difficulty with sleeping or nightmares • Unusual outbursts of anger • Fighting or avoidance of going to school • Isolation from friends and family • Fear and preoccupation with issues of safety and danger as shown by behaviors such as locking doors • Regression to behaviors of previous developmental stages • Expressions of guilt and magical thinking that the trauma was their fault • Stomach aches, headaches, or other physical problems • Difficulty with focusing at school, doing homework, or reading • Persistent feelings of distress when thinking about or reminded of the traumatic event

## HOW TO COPE AND WHAT WORKS

*There are no simple exercises to easily address all behaviors. There are some things you can do, though, that may help.*

### Ease your child back into a regular routine, and help to minimize their anxiety:

Stick to a predictable schedule and routine as much as possible; change is disruptive and may create anxiety in children; parents can assist kids' general adaptation by minimizing irregularities, especially surrounding separation

- When leaving the child, tell them where you are going and what you will be doing; tell the child what they will be doing while you are gone; for example: "Mrs. Franklin will play blocks with you and make your lunch; I'll be home after lunch"
- Be patient and make separation as safe and pleasant as possible; this may require taking extra time in the morning so clinging behavior does not delay and stress mom or dad
- Reassure the child by explaining that you are leaving because you must and not because you do not love them or dislike being with them; separate leaving from loving
- Reassure your child by saying that you will see them later; separation fears may exist in part because the child is uncertain of a reunion
- Explain that missing mom or dad is normal and hard but does not mean the child cannot have friends or fun
- Encourage childhood play and praise the child for being big enough to play without you
- Do not linger as this may reinforce the separation displays; after all, from the child's perspective, clinging pays off because mom and dad stay longer; so, leave your child when you must, and do it swiftly but lovingly

### Understand—Be Compassionate

Throughout all of this, it's important to remember that your child is reacting to the loss of something familiar, whether it is the presence of family members, contact with friends, or a specific routine. In many cases, they may be responding to the loss of a sense of safety and security.

Your child is, in a sense, mourning a former way of life, and their behavior is reflective of the mourning process. In fact, it can take a long time for a child to recover from losses or changes that affect their sense of security.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life can again have a sense of being normal.

### Stop and Focus All of Your Attention on Your Child for a Little While

Perhaps taking a few additional moments to connect with the child will be all they require to feel more secure.

Hug and touch your child • Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together • Talk with your child about their feelings about the disaster • Share **your** feelings • Give information the child can understand • Spend extra time with your child at bedtime



## SOURCES OF SUPPORT

### STAY WELL COUNSELING VIA THE COVID-19 HOTLINE

If you are experiencing emotional distress in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, get help from **Michigan Stay Well Counseling** via the COVID-19 Hotline. Call 1-888-535-6136 and press “8” to talk to a Michigan Stay Well counselor. Counselors available 24/7 – confidential and free. Foreign language interpreters available.

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### MICHIGAN PEER WARMLINE

If you are living with serious mental illness or substance use challenges and feel it will help lower your stress if you talk with someone who understands these issues, get help from the **Michigan PEER Warmline**. Call 1-888-PEER-753 (888-733-7753). Available every day from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m.

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### MICHIGAN CRISIS TEXT LINE

If you are experiencing emotional stress and anxiety but are more comfortable texting than talking, get help from the **Michigan Crisis Text Line**. Text the keyword “RESTORE” to 741741. Available 24/7.

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### NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

If you are thinking of taking your life, get help from the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**. Call 1-800-273-8255 – available 24/7. You can also text the keyword “TALK” to 741741, or visit [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

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### NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING HOTLINE

Access 24/7 video relay service. Call 1-800-273-8255 (TTY 1-800-799-4889).

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### HEADSPACE WEB SERVICE

If you would like to manage feelings of COVID-19 stress and anxiety through meditation, sleep, and movement exercises, get help from **Headspace Web Service**. Free to all Michiganders (normally a paid service). Visit [headspace.com/mi](https://headspace.com/mi).