Parent Tips for Helping Adolescents after Disasters

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
Detachment, shame, and guilt	▪ Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. ▪ Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.	▪ "Many teens–and adults–feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they could have done more. You're not at fault. Remember even the firefighters said there was nothing more we could have done."
Self-consciousness: About their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal.	▪ Help teens understand that these feelings are common. ▪ Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.	▪ "I was feeling the same thing. Scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside." ▪ "My cell phone is working again, why don't you see if you can get a hold of Pete to see how he's doing." ▪ "And thanks for playing the game with your little sister. She's much better now."
Acting out behavior: Using alcohol or drugs, sexually acting out, accident-prone behavior.	▪ Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. ▪ Limit access to alcohol and drugs. ▪ Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. ▪ On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where they are going and what they are planning to do.	▪ "Many teens–and some adults–feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs 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." Assure them that this extra checking-in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.
Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders	▪ Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. ▪ Explain to teens that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again.	▪ "When you're reminded, you might try saying to yourself, 'I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because there is no hurricane and I am safe.'" ▪ Suggest, "Watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. How about turning it off now?"

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Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships: Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent's reactions in the crisis.	▪ Explain that the strain on relationships is expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during the recovery period. ▪ Encourage tolerance for different family members' courses of recovery. ▪ Accept responsibility for your own feelings.	▪ Spend more time talking as a family 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 apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I am going to work harder to stay calm myself."
Radical changes in attitude	▪ Explain that changes in people's attitudes after a disaster are common, but often return back over time.	▪ "We are all under great stress. When people's lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry–even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we all will feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."
Premature entrance into adulthood: (wanting to leave school, get married).	▪ Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to make the teens feel more in control.	▪ "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."
Concern for other survivors and families	▪ Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not let them burden themselves with undue responsibility.	▪ Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).