

Managing the Stress of War and Terrorism: Guidelines for Families¹

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Attention County Faculty

This 13-chapter Family, Youth and Community Sciences department series is a collection of resources for use by Extension County Faculty. Extension County Faculty are encouraged to use these documents for training and to supplement these with local guest speakers and resources. These articles can be used for radio Public Service Announcements (PSAs) as a way to communicate with the general public.

Managing the Stress of War and Terrorism: Guidelines for Families

War and terrorism are unsettling and stressful for children and their families. Stress makes it hard to concentrate and go about daily routines. Long-term stress can hurt a family's health. This section helps you recognize signs of stress overload in adults, in children, and in families, and how families can manage stress and become resilient. Click here to see the entire series

Introduction

War and terrorism are scary for children and families. Children of all ages may overhear adult conversations or see acts of war or terror on the news. These events are unsettling and stressful for children and their parents. Stress makes it hard to concentrate and go about daily routines. Stress that lasts a long time can hurt an individual's and family's health. On the other hand, children and their families can learn to be resilient in times of stress. They can bounce back from hard times, and become even stronger.

Signs of Stress Overload for Adults

- Tired all the time
- Can't concentrate
- Have trouble sleeping (too much or too little)
- Use alcohol or drugs more
- Trouble getting along with friends and family

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- Have tension headaches, stomach aches, or lower back pains
- Feel depressed, anxious, or helpless
- Recurrent thoughts
- Mood changes (Irritability)
- Decline in performance at work

Signs of Stress for Children and Teens

- Express feeling afraid or scared
- Very emotional
- Grades drop suddenly; school problems
- Extra clingy or needy
- Go back to behaviors they've outgrown (bed wetting, thumb sucking)
- Withdraw from others
- Nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- New behavior problems
- Change in appetite

Signs of Stress in Families

- More disagreements that aren't solved
- Family members pull apart from each other
- Family members become too close and clingy
- Blaming one or two family members for problems
- More problems with children, like unruly behavior or poor school performance
- Strain between spouses/partners

What Families Can Do to Manage Stress and Become Resilient

- Listen to children. Don't push aside their fears. Answer their questions and let them share their

feelings. Tell them that you will do everything you can to help them stay safe.

- Talk with others. Don't withdraw. Tell adult family members and friends about your feelings.
- Follow daily family routines and work together. Children thrive on predictable patterns of waking, eating, working, and sleeping. All children like to feel that they are important to their family. Work together to get things done.
- Limit exposure to TV programs about the war/terrorism. Make sure to discuss with children what they saw on TV.
- Spend time together. Make your home a fun, welcoming and emotionally safe place. Do things together as a family, such as games and outdoor activities.
- Take time to relax. Cut down on stressful activities. (It is especially important that children not be exposed to war news coverage.) Schedule times to do whatever you find relaxing.
- Get physical. Regular exercise reduces stress. Walk, bike, garden, work out.
- Avoid alcohol and cigarettes. These cloud your judgment and lower your energy.
- Think positively. Try to be optimistic about the future. Remember that your family and the country have survived hard times before. Seek spiritual support in whatever ways help you.
- Follow emergency plans. Put together an emergency kit and be aware of disaster plans. Feeling in control is helpful in a stressful situation.
- Get professional help. If you are overwhelmed, depressed, have thoughts of suicide, or have a substance abuse problem, find a professional you can talk with. Your doctor, clergy or mental health association can assist you find someone who is trained to help.

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