

Crisis Intervention for Mental Health – In Case of a Fire

Breaking difficult news to children, especially about something as traumatic as a house fire, requires careful thought and sensitivity. By following these principles from you can help your children (and yourself) move through their emotions in a healthy, embodied way, reducing the risk of long-term trauma.

Here's a step-by-step approach to help guide you through this challenging conversation:

1. Prepare Yourself First

- Take time to process your emotions so you can approach the conversation with calmness and reassurance. **Check out “suggestions for grounding/de-stressing quickly” below to use for yourself too.**
- Think through what you want to say and anticipate possible questions or reactions.

2. Choose the Right Setting

- Find a quiet, private space where you won't be interrupted.
- Make sure your children feel safe and supported before starting the conversation.

3. Use Simple, Clear Language

- Avoid overwhelming them with too many details.
- Say something like, “I need to tell you something difficult. Our house caught fire, and we won't be able to live there for a while.” This can be adapted to share difficult news about other people's homes as well.

4. Reassure Them

- Emphasize that everyone is safe and together.
- Let them know that it's okay to feel scared, sad, or angry or anything that they are feeling.

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- Reassure them that you're working on finding solutions and that you'll all get through this together.

5. Address Their Questions and Feelings

- Allow them to ask questions and answer honestly but age-appropriately.
- Validate their emotions: "It's okay to feel sad or worried. I feel that way too."
- They may ask the same question several times as they try to construct a narrative that makes sense to them.

6. Focus on the Positives

- Highlight what's most important: everyone's safety.
- Mention any plans for temporary housing or steps to rebuild.

7. Involve Them in Recovery

- Give them small roles, like packing essential items or helping with decisions, to provide a sense of control and purpose.
- Consider finding ways to help others if you're up for it. Helping others can help us feel better.

8. Offer Continuous Support

- Check in regularly to see how they're feeling.
- Consider seeking support from school counselors, therapists, or other resources if they seem particularly distressed.

This is a tough moment, but your love and reassurance will help them feel secure despite the loss.

Tips for Regulating Emotions and Preventing Trauma During the Conversation

Helping your children process the news in a healthy way is crucial to minimize the emotional impact and prevent lasting trauma. Here are some strategies for emotional regulation and creating a sense of safety:

For You as a Parent: Managing Your Emotions

1. Take a Moment to Ground Yourself

- Breathe deeply and slowly before the conversation.
- Remind yourself that staying calm will help your children feel secure.
- Visualize providing comfort and reassurance to set a supportive tone.

2. Express Calm Confidence

- Speak in a steady, warm tone.
- Avoid appearing panicked, even if you feel overwhelmed. Children often mirror their caregivers' emotions.

3. Pause if Overwhelmed

- If emotions rise during the talk, it's okay to pause, take a breath, and regroup before continuing.

Suggestions for grounding/de-stressing quickly

- **Physiological sigh** - This is done with two inhales through the nose and a long exhale through the mouth. Inhale through the nose until the lungs are almost full, then take another inhalation in through the nose without exhaling, then and a long exhalation with an audible sigh, out of the mouth. Repeat 2-3 times. This can be done with the eyes opened or closed.
- **Signal Breath** – Breathe in, let the belly rise (like a balloon is blowing up in the belly); exhale, let the belly fall. Try saying a soothing word to yourself as you inhale and exhale. For example, you can say, “relax” on the inhale and “easy does it” on the exhale. This can be done once or for several minutes, with the eyes opened or closed.
- **Box breathing** – Let the belly rise on the inhale and fall on the exhale. Breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, exhale for a count of 4, hold the breath out for a count of 4. Repeat 4 times. This can be done with the eyes opened or closed.

- 5,4,3,2,1 grounding - Engage the senses to get out of your, “thinking brain” and to bring yourself back to the present moment when you feel overwhelmed. Look around the room and focus on 5 things you can see. Use your hand or any part of your body and feel 4 different things. Now pay attention to 3 different sounds. Bring your awareness to 2 things that you can smell. Finally, pay attention to the taste in your mouth. This technique should be done with the eyes open.
- If you feel overwhelmed, bring to your mind the image of a STOP sign. What does it look like, think about the shapes and the colors, that make up the sign? What would it feel like to touch it? Really imagine it in front of you. Slow down your thoughts. Take a “signal breath.” Use this opportunity to, “change the channel” on any unhelpful thoughts and then try to choose another, more helpful thought.

For the Conversation: Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Environment

1. Start with Reassurance

- Begin by affirming safety: “We’re all safe, and that’s the most important thing.”
- Let them know they’re not alone and you’ll face this together as a family.

2. Keep the Message Age-Appropriate

- Use simple, clear language without unnecessary details that might overwhelm them.
- Avoid dramatic descriptions or focusing on frightening aspects, like flames or destruction.

3. Allow Space for Emotions

- Encourage them to express their feelings: “It’s okay to feel however you feel right now.”
- Avoid dismissing their concerns, even if they seem minor, such as losing a toy.

4. Normalize Emotional Responses

- Explain that it's normal to feel sad, scared, or confused: "I feel sad too, and it's okay to cry."
- Let them know that emotions can come and go, and they'll feel better with time.

5. Stay Present and Offer Comfort

- Use physical touch, like a hug or holding their hand, to help regulate their emotions.
- Maintain eye contact and offer a calm, reassuring presence.

Helping Them Regulate Emotions

1. Teach Simple Breathing Techniques

- Encourage slow, deep breaths: "Let's take a deep breath together to help us feel calmer."
- You can hold up 5 fingers and have them, "blow out the candles" one by one, putting down a finger each time.
- Have them lie down (you can lie down next to them) and put a stuffed animal or other object on their belly to teach diaphragmatic breathing. Watch the toy rise on the inhale and fall on the exhale. They might even start laughing if the toy falls off your belly or theirs.

2. Offer Distraction if Needed

- If they seem overwhelmed, gently redirect their focus to something comforting, like a favorite activity or toy.

3. Use Grounding Techniques

- Help them focus on the present: "Let's look around and name three things we can see or hear."
- This can reduce feelings of panic or dissociation.

4. Create a Sense of Routine

- Even during chaos, small routines (like regular mealtimes or bedtime stories) can provide stability.

After the Conversation: Preventing Long-Term Trauma

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1. Encourage Open Communication

- Let them know they can talk to you anytime: “If you have more questions later, I’m here for you.”

2. Provide Hope and Positivity

- Emphasize that this situation is temporary, and you’ll rebuild and create new memories together.

3. Limit Media Exposure

- Avoid letting them see graphic images or hear alarming details on the news.

4. Seek Professional Support if Needed

- If signs of extreme distress or anxiety persist, consider involving a school counselor or child therapist for additional support.

By staying calm, empathetic, and focused on creating a sense of safety, you can help your children process the news while minimizing potential trauma.

Understanding How Trauma Develops

Peter Levine, a renowned trauma expert and founder of *Somatic Experiencing*, emphasizes the importance of helping individuals, including children, process emotions as they arise to prevent trauma from becoming stored in the body. Drawing from his work, here’s how you can help your children process emotions during and after delivering difficult news:

- Trauma often results when overwhelming emotions are not fully processed, leaving the nervous system “stuck” in a state of fear, fight, flight or freeze.
- By allowing emotions to flow naturally and providing tools to regulate the body’s stress response, we can prevent trauma from becoming embedded.

Guiding Children Through Emotional Processing

1. Normalize the Body's Responses

- Explain that physical sensations like a fast heartbeat, tight chest, or upset stomach are natural reactions to stress.
- Say something like, “It’s normal to feel a little shaky or have butterflies in your tummy when something scary happens.”

2. Encourage Emotional Expression

- Let them know it’s okay to cry, tremble, or even feel angry: “Your body is just trying to let out the big feelings, and that’s a good thing.”
- Avoid saying things like “Don’t cry” or “Be strong,” which may suppress their natural emotional release.

3. Help Them Stay Connected to Their Bodies

- Use grounding techniques: “Feel your feet on the floor. Can you wiggle your toes? That helps remind your body that you’re safe right now.”
- Encourage gentle movements like shaking out their hands or stretching to release tension.

4. Support the Completion of Stress Responses

- Levine emphasizes that trauma can result when the body’s natural stress response (fight, flight, or freeze) is interrupted.
- If your child seems frozen or withdrawn, gently encourage small, natural movements like taking a deep breath, walking, or holding a comforting object to help the body release the energy.

Practical Tools for Emotional Regulation

1. Slow Breathing with Rhythmic Touch

- Sit with them and breathe slowly together. Place your hand on their back or hold their hand to provide grounding support.
- Use a calming rhythm: “Let’s breathe in for four counts and out for six counts.”

2. Pendulation: Shifting Between Safety and Discomfort

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- Levine suggests helping individuals move between feelings of distress and safety to avoid overwhelm.
- Guide them gently: “Let’s think about something that makes you feel safe, like cuddling your favorite pet. Now, if it feels okay, let’s talk a little about what happened. If it feels too hard, we’ll come back to our safe thought.”

3. Use Imagery and Play

- Encourage visualization of a “safe place” they can visit in their minds: “Close your eyes and imagine being wrapped in a warm, cozy blanket.”
- Use playful activities like drawing or storytelling to help them process their emotions creatively and without pressure.

Signs to Watch for and Gently Address

- **Hyperarousal:** If your child seems jittery, overly emotional, or agitated, help them discharge excess energy through movement or shaking their arms and legs.
- **Hypoarousal (Shutdown):** If they appear numb or detached, gently bring them back to the present through touch, grounding exercises, or soft conversation about something familiar and comforting.

Reinforcing a Sense of Safety and Control

1. Empower Them with Small Choices

- Trauma can make children feel powerless. Offer small choices to restore a sense of control: “Would you like to pack your favorite toy or your favorite book first?”

2. Provide Predictability

- Explain next steps in simple terms: “For now, we’ll stay with family, and soon we’ll find a new place to live.”

Ongoing Support

- **Validate Their Experience:** Reassure them that their feelings are valid and expected after a big event.

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- **Create Safe Outlets:** Offer activities like journaling, drawing, or playing to help them process emotions without needing words.
- **Revisit the Experience Gradually:** As Levine suggests, gently revisiting the event in small doses over time helps prevent avoidance and integrates the experience without overwhelm.

Disclaimer

This information has been compiled by Dr. Erica Felsenthal to help during the current fire crisis in Southern California. Please contact Dr. Felsenthal for sources, questions or for additional information. This is for informational and educational purposes only and should not be considered therapy or any form of treatment. Please check with your doctor to make sure these suggestions are appropriate for you.