

Psychological burden in Children

The earthquake is a sudden, stressful event and a traumatic experience, because it doesn't offer time for psychological preparation, reduces the sense of control that can be gained on nature and life and causes intense fear and a sense of helplessness in children and adults, modifying for longer time the biological and psychological equilibrium.

Earthquake and family

Very often, during an earthquake children may be separated from parents and this lack of direct psychological support and consolation can increase the stress caused by the catastrophic event because they may fear that they won't meet again or worry about the safety of their parents.

Furthermore, parents may present for many years mental problems in significant proportion that can be transferred to their children, mainly because they look at their parents to distinguish their emotions and react accordingly. Thus, even in such cases parents should be available and supportive to their children.

The evacuation of damaged houses may offer some relief because they resort to a safer place but it disorders the collective rehabilitation and reorganization of life developed with the neighborhood which often has a therapeutic effect.



Factors that influence the reactions of children

Children may experience a variety of emotional reactions after a disaster and it is important to understand that these reactions are, to some extent, natural. Most children and adolescents experience a catastrophic event without facing serious problems. The reaction of a child depends on several factors, including:

- The age of a child affects the way it reacts to a catastrophic event. A six year old may refuse to go to school, a teenager may be irritable, fight with his parents, neglect his homework.
- The reaction of a child also depends on the extent of the damage experienced. If a family member or a familiar person has been killed or seriously injured, if the house or the school has been severely damaged, it is more likely for the child to react more intensely.
- The reaction of the parents and other adults. Children generally understand parents' concerns and are particularly sensitive during a crisis. Parents who react with panic affect their children, which react accordingly.
- Previous traumatic experiences of the child. The disruption of the family, a traumatic divorce of his parents or a recent bereavement makes the child more vulnerable to new traumas.
- Children's Psychological problems. Separation anxiety, depression or other serious disorders that may pre-exist, are risk factors for the occurrence of severe psychological effects after a catastrophic event.

Children's reactions after an earthquake

After an earthquake children fear that the event will happen again and put themselves and their family in danger. These fears and unpleasant feelings may be a product of their imagination, but they should be taken seriously by adults. However, some children, as well as adults, may experience a certain psychological disorder known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD usually occur within the first 3 months after the traumatic event, but often continue for years. Apart from PTSD, often children display symptoms of depression. Other secondary effects are: anxiety disorders, separation anxiety, school avoidance, psychosomatic problems and bedwetting.



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

There are three groups of symptoms regarding PTSD:

When Re-experiencing of the traumatic event

- Younger children may play repetitive games, where issues and aspects of the trauma, are expressed.
- Recurrent distressing dreams or nightmares relevant to the event. Younger children may dream of scary monsters.
- They feel or behave like the traumatic event is being recurring and they are reliving it.
- They feel intense psychological distress or fear, remembering the traumatic event.
- They present physical reactions, such as restlessness, startle, and tremor when they remember the event.

Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma

- They avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event.
- They avoid activities, places or people that remind them of the trauma.
- They have difficulty remembering an important aspect of the event.
- There is a markedly diminished interest or participation in activities, play is reduced.
- They feel detached or estranged from others.
- They have a limited range of emotions, for example, unable to have loving feelings.
- They feel that they will not live to finish school, study, marry, etc.

Persistent symptoms of increased anxiety or arousal

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Exhibit irritability or outbursts of anger.
- Concentration difficulties.
- Hyper-vigilance: sensitive in recognizing sounds, smells, images or other stimuli that remind them of the event.
- Exaggerated startle response, over-reaction to the unexpected.

For diagnosing PTSD **must be** present: **at least one** of re-experiencing symptoms, **three** avoidance symptoms and **two** of the symptoms of increased arousal for **at least one month**.

