

# How to help a child during a difficult period

Every child may experience a difficult period in their life, but some events are so stressful that it can be almost impossible for a child to cope with the situation without the support of parents or caregivers. If a child's reactions to challenging situations or events persist over time, they may negatively affect the child's everyday functioning and development. The good news is that you, as a parent or caregiver, play a crucial role in your child's life and can provide the necessary help during difficult times, thereby supporting your child's healthy development.

💡 Did you know that children who feel safe and loved by their parents or caregivers are more likely to recover after experiencing adverse events or difficult life experiences?

If you feel that your child is showing signs of traumatic reactions or excessive stress (see more in **How children and adolescents can respond to trauma**), you can support your child in the following ways:

## Keep calm

- Recognize and normalize your child's feelings.
- Lower your voice.
- Reassure your child that you are there for them under all circumstances, even when they are experiencing difficult or unpleasant emotions.
- Be honest.

Acknowledging and sharing that we adults also sometimes experience uncomfortable feelings and thoughts can help a child recognize and understand their own emotions and thoughts. It is also important to admit that we do not have all the answers—and that this is completely okay.

## Be here and now

Make time for your child and create a safe space for them. You can start by:

- Talking with them.
- Listening attentively to what your child says.
- Offering physical contact, such as a hug or gentle touch.
- Giving them your full attention by maintaining eye contact.

## Routines

Create daily routines with your child that provide a greater sense of security and safety. For example, you can talk through what the day will look like together each morning. In the evening, you might reflect together on three nice things that happened during the day or things you are grateful for.

## Relaxation techniques

DBreathing is a key tool during intense stress and panic, as it can help your child regain a sense of control over what is happening in their body. Try focusing together on slow, steady inhalations and exhalations. You can find more relaxation techniques in *How to help a child who is experiencing a panic attack or intense stress*.

## Try to be patient

Processing and recovering from a traumatic or extremely stressful event takes a different amount of time for everyone. Try to approach both your child and yourself with patience and compassion—this is a demanding process for you both.

## Try to be predictable

Children are often afraid of the near future rather than the distant future that adults tend to worry about most. Even if we cannot say with certainty what will happen in the coming months, we usually know what will happen in the next few days. Try to reassure your child by talking about short-term plans—what will happen today or this week, or by planning weekend activities together (and trying to stick to those plans).

## Do not blame the child

Try not to blame your child for anything. Instead, reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened.

A child may experience strong feelings of guilt—for not being obedient enough, not being strong enough, or not being able to protect family members. Some children may even feel guilt simply for being born and believe that their existence caused difficulties.

## Take care of yourself

We adults also have limited capacities and needs that must be met. Supporting children who have experienced intense stress can be emotionally and psychologically demanding. Caring for others who are coping with distressing experiences can lead to what is known as secondary trauma or compassion fatigue. You can learn more about these concepts in **Secondary Trauma**.

## Examples of sentences you can use to support your child

- "You seem sad when we talk about this. That's normal—I feel sad about it too."
- "I know you're scared, and that's okay. I'm here and I'll help you get through this."
- "It's okay. We are safe now. (Only say this if it is true.) I'm here with you."
- "What is happening right now is not your fault."
- "It's completely okay if you don't feel like talking about your feelings. Maybe we could try drawing them together."
- "Let's think of a person or a thing that helps you feel safe."



**Remember** that in order to support your child effectively, you also need to take care of yourself. Adults, too, need to feel safe and supported. Tips on self-care can be found in **How to look after yourself**. You can also seek support from a family member, friend, or a professional (psychologist, psychotherapist, or psychiatrist).



**Remember** that as a parent or caregiver, you are a very important adult in your child's life. You have the ability to help your child cope with difficult situations and to support their healthy development. You can be proud of yourself. However, if your child's psychological difficulties do not improve and persist for more than a few weeks, it is important to seek professional help. You can find professional contacts in **Where to seek help for children and adults**.

