



HEALING AFTER HARVEY

Helping Your Children After a Natural Disaster

by Andres Tapia, Ph.D., LPC-S

“Hope is being able to see that there is light, despite the darkness”

-Desmond Tutu

As the storm begins to dissipate from the greater Houston area and surrounding communities, the process of recovery is just beginning for many while others continue to be in need of emergency assistance. As parents, when the rain began to pour down many of us jumped into ‘survival mode’ to ensure the safety of our children and our homes including monitoring the news for minute-to-minute updates, preparing emergency supplies, contacting family and friends to ensure they are safe, instructing your family on what to do should the water reach your home, etc. This high-anxiety high-energy state is both normal and necessary and mobilizes us for the preservation of life. At the same time, our children (of all ages) are bearing

witness and attempting to make sense of it all. In fact, it is highly likely that while as parents we strive to shield them from the ‘high-anxiety high-energy’ we as adults experience in such emergencies, our children partake and often internalize the images on television, our expressed worry, and the stress associated with this natural disaster. Depending on our child’s developmental age, this can be processed and coped with very differently ranging from relative calm to overt expressions of anxiety and even behavioral changes. In my experience as a mental health disaster relief volunteer, parents are equally as impacted and often are not sure what to say to their children in such circumstances or what they can do to help them cope and heal in a healthy and adaptive manner. Here are some evidenced-based tips that maybe helpful to consider as you comfort and assist your children.

Thinking, Feeling, Growing.

August 29, 2017

DR. ANDRES TAPIA



Model emotional regulation and calm.

A very practical, but very important tip. Most children, especially the younger ones, learn to regulate their emotions and stress responses via their caregivers. If they see us become anxious it is also important that they see us regulate our stress responses. They will learn that anxiety and stress responses are normal, but will also learn that when the danger is gone we can return to a state of calm. You may want to verbalize it and express it overtly as if you are demonstrating, “mommy was very nervous because that was dangerous, but now that we are safe mommy is calm, I am breathing slowly, I am able to play again...pheeew, I feel better! What do you think can help you feel calm?”

Talk it out and listen, listen, listen.

Do not assume that if your child (any age) does not say anything, that it is a sign all is well. Children often do not want to further burden their parents or have not yet developed the coping knowledge that they should talk it out. Furthermore, some children may be 'fine' at one moment but have a delayed response in processing. When talking it out, make sure you do not project further anxiety (e.g., "that was bad, did you see all the destruction, etc."), get after them, or tell them they should not feel anxious/sad/etc. Normalize it and guide them forward. Talking it out may be facilitated through the use of drawings, a game, a song, etc. You could encourage them to draw the storm and then prompt them to draw the recovery to the storm such as the sun rising.

Use what has worked before. Toys, video games, and 'blankies.'

You are the best expert of your child. While some children, especially the younger ones, may not have sophisticated methods of coping, they likely have items around the home or activities that they tend to gravitate to that provide a sense of comfort. My son tends to grab and hug a plush robot he sleeps with and plays with his superheroes when he is nervous. Also, extra video game time is probably ok! Toys, video games, and other objects provide a sense of grounding, comfort, normalcy, and attachment that can be very helpful. A family-based activity can also be a great option (e.g., board games, cooking dinner together, etc.).

Routine is good.

While we do not want to rush them back into a routine without giving them a chance to process, a sense of routine can be helpful. If you usually have dinner at a certain time, read for one hour, bed time at 9:00 pm, walk the dog (if safe) ...do this! This can help promote the sense that life will continue and that can move on. Both children and adults alike may be

tempted to remain glued to the news casts or sit around to see what happens; however, this is not ideal. In some ways, especially for younger children, it can create a sense of continuation of the danger and distress.

Tell the truth.

This may seem counterintuitive in our effort to protect our children, but lying about what is going on can actually exacerbate distress. As many of you parents already know, children know far more than we give them credit for. They may not make the same meaning we make of events as adults or fully grasp the severity of a situation, but they are definitely thinking about it. Telling them the truth, in a mindful, gentle, and developmentally appropriate manner helps put into context what has happened. You as the caregiver, rather than the newscast, frame what is happening and then provide what the newscast cannot...comfort and reassurance afterward.

Turn the news off.

For adults, it is important to maintain ourselves informed, but truthfully, even we need a break from the constant coverage and images of disaster. Consider limiting how often and when you turn the news on; perhaps looking to online updates which may be less absorbed by your children. When you do watch the new debrief and explain in a calm and objective way what is viewed (e.g., "Ok, son, it sounds like the rain has stopped but the mayor is asking that we all continue to stay off the roads").

Monitor and seek counseling.

Many seek counseling only once signs of concern are present. Counseling can assist children further process these events and can be used as a preventative strategy. It is especially important to seek counseling if stress reactions persist or if there is an increase in distress. Monitor progress.

DR. ANDRES TAPIA

Andres Tapia, Ph.D., LPC-S, is bilingual in English and Spanish, and has been practicing in various settings for over a decade. He is currently completing the final stages of licensure as a clinical psychologist in Texas, and is a post-doctoral fellow in clinical psychology. Dr. Tapia also proudly practices and collaborates with The Conative Group, PLLC, a private practice founded by psychologist, Dr. Kimberly Harrison, in Houston, TX. Dr. Tapia's professional experiences includes providing clinical services to and research with refugees, private practice, community mental health services with children, adults, and geriatric populations, inpatient clinical services, counseling and psychological services in the university setting, adjunct teaching, supervision of licensed professional counselor interns, training and certifying licensed professional counselor supervisors, consultation with school districts and agencies, a broad array of psychological testing in English and Spanish, continuing education for professionals, and has worked as a mobile crisis outreach clinician. Additionally, Dr. Tapia has held board positions at various professional organizations, including the Rio Grande Valley Counseling Association and the Houston Counseling Association. Dr. Tapia has also served his community (in the Rio Grande Valley prior to moving and now in Houston) as a youth pastor and other outreach ministries for almost two decades.

To contact Dr. Tapia you can email him to dr.tapia@theconativegroup.com or call The Conative Group at 713-993-7030.