



Responding to Stressful Events: Families, Children & Youth

Children look to adults and caregivers for guidance and [comfort during](#) during stressful events. Talk to your child and/or youth about the stressful situation they have seen, experienced or heard about.

Try the following tips to help children and youth cope with stressful events:

- Listen and check in to see how much they know about the topic
- Find a time and setting where they are more comfortable talking
- Keep your responses simple, practical and age appropriate
- Be patient, remember that some children and [youth](#) are likely experiencing these emotions for the first time and need time and supports to learn how to cope
- Children and youth may be seeing upsetting content on [social media](#) and other platforms
- Try to limit screen time and [upsetting information](#) by being aware of what your child is looking at and using
- Use activities such as drawing, writing, reading books, or [online tools](#) to help them express their feelings and emotions
- Practice calming strategies when dealing with difficult emotions, such as deep breathing and [mindfulness](#)
- Check out [CHEO](#) and [Parenting in Ottawa](#) for more tips on building resilience in [children](#) and [youth](#)

Recognizing Signs of Stress in Children & Youth

Children and youth will react to stressful events in different ways depending on culture, age, stage of development and temperament. Watch for changes in mood and behaviours including:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns (too much or too little, nightmares or not wanting to get out of bed)
- Spending less time with family and friends than usual
- Complaining of headaches, stomach problems or other health issues
- Changes in emotions such as excessive crying, worrying, sadness, fear, anger, confusion, helplessness and panic attacks
- Changes in schoolwork, missing school or going back to behaviours they have outgrown (e.g., bedwetting, acting out, tantrums)
- Not taking part in activities they used to enjoy
- Using substances (drugs) including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis or opioids to cope

Know when to get help

- If your child or youth continues to have strong feelings that persist and or interfere with day-to-day life
- If your child or youth develops thoughts of harming themselves or others and/or thoughts of suicide
- If you feel that your child or youth can benefit from speaking to a health professional

Overcoming past stressful events

Children and youth who have experienced stressful events in the past may have re-occurring thoughts about the event and have strong emotions. Here are some ways to support them:

- Talk to them about their reaction and what happened
- Make a list of situations that bring out strong emotions and work together to identify safe coping skills. Try practicing them and "[Make a Resilience Action Plan](#)" together if it helps
- Praise positive behaviours. Let them know they are doing well when they are showing kindness, being caring and cooperative
- Take the time to prepare them for events that may cause them to have strong emotions

It is important to ask for support when facing difficult situations.

Some of the supports available to you include:

- **Immediate crisis support** is available from the [Distress Centre Ottawa](#) and Region 24/7 - 613-238-3311 (Bilingual) or [Tel-Aide Outaouais](#). For children and youth ages 18 and under, please **call Youth Services Bureau's** 24/7 Crisis Line at 613-260-2360 or 1-877-377-7775 (toll free for Eastern Ontario)
- [AccessMHA](#) helps anyone over the age of 16 to find support for mental health and substance use.
- Go to [1Call1Click.ca](#) to access support for anyone under 21 years of age or call 613-260-2360 or 1-877-377-7775 (toll free for Eastern Ontario)
- [Counselling Connect](#) provides quick access to a free phone or video counselling session.
- The [Walk-In Counselling](#) clinic offers free counselling support without an appointment in English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Somali, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Call 613-755-2277 for locations and availability

For more support and information visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca/MentalHealthandWellness