

Helping Children Cope with Trauma after Kentucky Tornadoes

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FRANKFORT, Ky. – Kentucky children who lived through the December tornadoes may feel trauma for years, if it is not addressed. Families are encouraged to seek professional help to get the children to process their reactions and help them heal.

The trauma caused by the Dec. 10-11 tornadoes that damaged thousands of homes, razed entire towns and counted 12 children among its casualties, could last long after the event for those who survived. Even as schools reopen, the stressors continue. Some displaced students now live far from their schools without transportation, and others attend school beside empty desks where their classmates once sat.

From news reports, here are the children's own words: "It just sucked everything up, the Christmas tree ... with the presents," said an 8-year-old. A middle-schooler searched for a descriptor: "There's not really words that you can put to say about it." Children with these anxieties need their parents to be aware of how to get help.

From caregivers

Mental health experts in the Commonwealth's health system provided the following suggestions:

Children often look to their caregivers for support and to learn how to cope with adversity and trauma. It's a good time to listen to the children, understand what they're feeling, and reassure them their feelings make sense because what they experienced was scary and difficult. Professionals suggest parents and caregivers can:

- Create a stable environment by establishing a regular routine.



- Find ways to be present, connect, spend time together and have fun.
- Remind children of ways they are staying safe.
- Focus on the positive; identify small successes or strengths.
- Ask children how they are doing and listen to their answers; let them talk when they feel worried but never force them to talk.
- Allow and encourage children to ask questions; explain what happened honestly and clearly.
- Reduce exposure to media images and stories about the tornadoes.
- Practice calming exercises together such as breathing or relaxation exercises.

How to Tell When a Child May Need Help Coping

Behavior experts say parents should observe their children for signs they feel troubled after the disaster. Some signs, such as nightmares, may be similar to those of adults but an important difference is that children often lack the vocabulary to explain what is upsetting them.

These normal signs of trauma could indicate a need for additional support if they persist beyond several months, worsen, or are severely impacting daily life:

- Nightmares
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Flattened emotions
- Irritability
- Hearing scary noises that aren't there or preoccupation with the weather

Help is Available

You are not alone. These Community Mental Health Centers, supported federally and by the Commonwealth, are available in Kentucky:

- **The Adanta Group** (Serves Adair, Casey, Clinton, Cumberland, **Green**, McCreary, Pulaski, Russell, **Taylor** and Wayne counties)
Website: <https://www.adanta.org/client-information/client-services-guide>
Crisis Line: 800-633-5599
- **Communicare** (Serves Breckinridge, Grayson, Hardin, LaRue, **Marion**, Meade, Nelson, and Washington counties)
Website: <https://www.communicare.org/behavioral-health>



Crisis Line: 800-641-4673

- **Four Rivers Behavioral Health** (Serves Ballard, Calloway, Carlisle, **Fulton**, **Graves**, **Hickman**, Livingston, **Marshall**, and McCracken counties)

Website: <https://4rbh.org/resources-after-a-disaster-crisis-or-trauma/>

Crisis Line: 800-592-3980

- **LifeSkills** (Serves Allen, **Barren**, Butler, Edmondson, **Hart**, Logan, Metcalfe, Monroe, Simpson, and **Warren** counties.)

Website: <https://www.lifeskills.com/crisis>

Crisis Line: 800-223-8913

- **Pennyroyal Center** (Serves **Caldwell**, **Christian**, Crittenden, **Hopkins**, **Lyon**, **Muhlenberg**, **Todd**, and Trigg counties.)

Website: https://pennyroyalcenter.org/services/behavioral_health/

Crisis Line: 877-473-7766

Text: CONFIDE to 839863 for youth or RESPOND to 839863 for adults.

- **RiverValley Behavioral Health** (Serves Daviess, Hancock, Henderson, McLean, **Ohio**, Union, and Webster counties)

Website: <https://www.rvbh.com/crisis-line/>

Crisis Line: 800-433-7291 (call or text)

Other resources:

- **The American Red Cross** uses professional therapists to meet all survivors' emotional needs in the aftermath of a disaster. Call **800-733-2767** (or 800-Red-Cross) to be connected to someone in your area.
- **Family Resource Centers and Youth Services Centers:** Your child's school has valuable resources in the Family Resource Centers in elementary schools and Youth Services Centers in middle and high schools.
- **The Kentucky Crisis Text Line:** To reach a volunteer crisis counselor, text **KY** to **741-741**.
- **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network** has several free resources on helping children cope after a tornado at <https://bit.ly/3GBFgHy>.

For the latest information on Kentucky's recovery from the tornadoes, visit fema.gov/disaster/4630. Follow FEMA on Twitter at [FEMA Region 4 \(@femaregion4\)](https://twitter.com/femaregion4) / [Twitter](https://twitter.com/femaregion4) and at facebook.com/fema.



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