

How to Help Children Ages 12-18

Adolescence is already a challenging time for young people, who have so many changes happening in their bodies. They struggle with wanting more independence from parents, and have a tendency to feel nothing can harm them. Traumatic events can make them feel out of control, even if they act as if they are strong. They will also feel bad for people affected by the disaster, and have a strong desire to know why the event occurred.

Typical reactions of children ages 12 to 18:

- Avoidance of feelings
- Constant rumination about the disaster
- Distancing themselves from friends and family
- Anger or resentment
- Mood swings and irritability
- Changes in appetite and/or sleep habits
- Depression, and perhaps expression of suicidal thoughts
- Panic and anxiety, including worrying about the future
- Academic issues, such as trouble with memory and concentration, and/or refusing to attend school
- Participation in risky or illegal behavior, like drinking alcohol



What you can do:

- Make your teen feel safe again. Adolescents do not like to show vulnerability; they may try to act as if they are doing fine even though they are not. While they may resist hugs, your touch can help them feel secure. You can say something like, “I know you’re grown now, but I just need to give you a hug.”
- Help teens feel helpful. Give them small tasks and responsibilities in the household, then praise them for what they have done and how they have handled themselves. Do not overburden teens with too many responsibilities, especially adult-like ones, as that will add to their anxiety.
- Open the door for discussion. It’s very typical for teens to say they don’t want to talk. Try to start a conversation while you are doing an activity together, so that the conversation does not feel too intense or confrontational.
- Consider peer groups. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers, so consider organizing one. Also encourage conversation with other trusted adults, like a relative or teacher.
- Limit exposure to TV, newspapers and radio. While teens can better handle the news than younger kids, those who are unable to detach themselves from TV or the radio may be trying to deal with anxiety in unhealthy ways. In any case, talk with your teen about the things she has seen or heard.
- Help your teen take action. Kids this age will want to help the community. Find appropriate volunteer opportunities.
- Be aware of substance abuse. Teens are particularly at risk for turning to alcohol or drugs to numb their anxiety. If your teen has been behaving secretly or is seemingly drunk or high, get in touch with a doctor. And talk to your teen in a kind way. For example, “People often drink or use drugs after a disaster to calm themselves or forget, but it can also cause more problems. Some other things you can do are take a walk, talk to me or your friends about how you feel, or write about your hopes for a better future.”

From: [Helping Children Cope With Trauma \(childmind.org\)](https://www.childmind.org/helping-children-cope-with-trauma)