

# Mental Care for Children after Disasters for Teachers and School Nurses



# **Preface**

**The necessity of "mental care" has become apparent for anyone who has suffered from an artificial or natural disaster such as the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake. The wide range of mental health problems experienced by local residents is proof of this necessity. Numerous practices have been put in place to provide them with this mental health care. In the damaged areas, mental health care workers are asked to collaborate and engage in activities with the local communities.**

**Because mental health care is a critical issue during a disaster, the Shizuoka University Disaster Prevention Center takes steps to be prepared, including conducting research, practicing mental health care, and educating people in the local community.**

**We have published this brochure for teachers and school nurses from elementary and junior high schools as a part of our activities. In collaboration with the Shizuoka Prefecture Clinical Psychologist Association, this brochure has been created to provide basic information on mental health care for children and students in case of a disaster.**

**We appreciate your use of this brochure and we would value any feedback.**

**Okii Naotaka  
President of Shizuoka University  
January 2010**

# Exposure to disasters

During a disaster, you may be exposed to various stresses such as a fear of death or the loss of a significant person or thing. Wide-ranging reactions to stress may occur after the disaster.

- 1 Stress from fear or shock → **Trauma reaction**
- 2 Stress from the loss of an important person, thing, place  
Stress from the loss , or memory → **Loss reaction**
- 3 Stress from continuing anxieties such as a change in living situation, a difficult stay in evacuation shelters, and worries about rebuilding a new life, such as securing a job and a house → **Stress reaction from daily life**

# What is caused by stress?

The problematic symptoms of stress don't appear because I have the emotional capacity to deal with them.

**Becoming stressful**

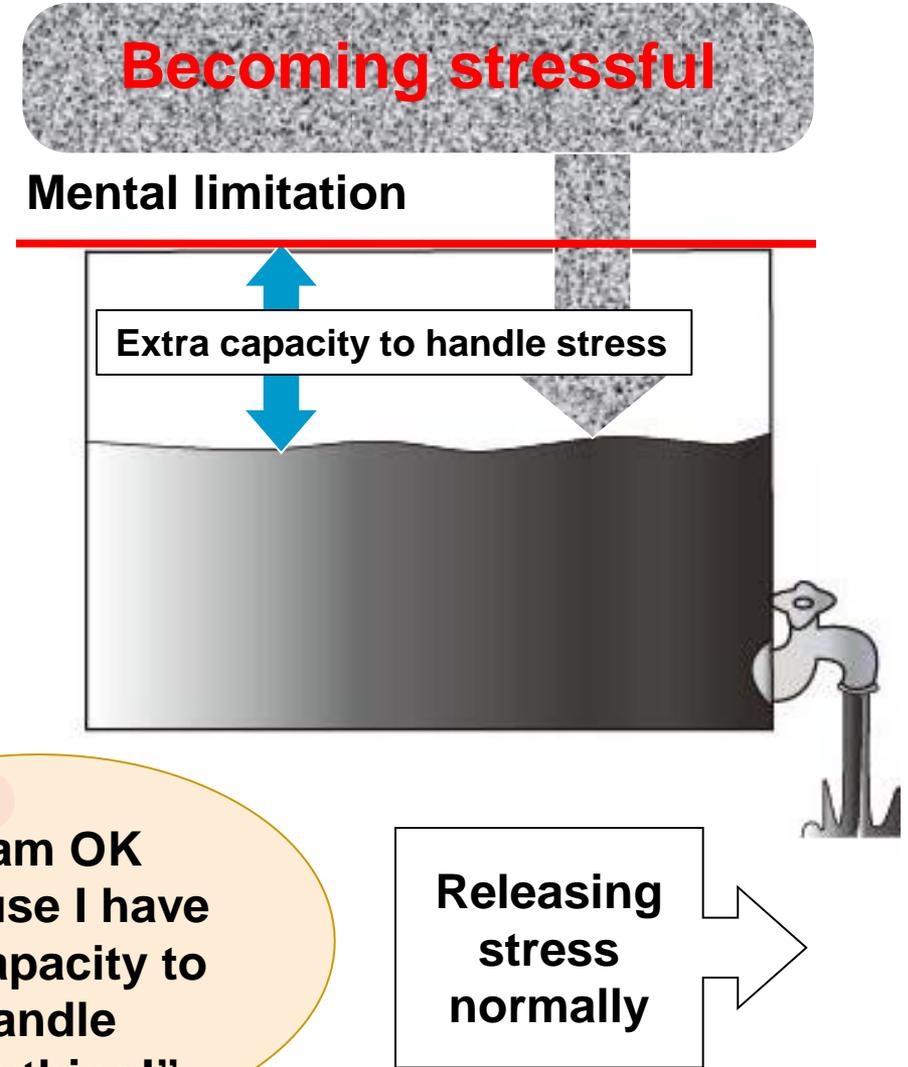
Mental limitation

Extra capacity to handle stress



"I am OK because I have the capacity to handle everything!"

Releasing stress normally

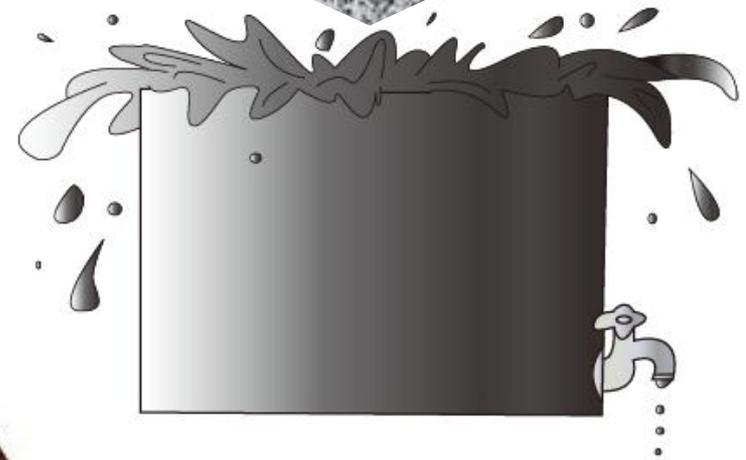


If you have too much stress, you may lose the ability to deal with it because it exceeds your mental limitations.

## What is caused by stress?

Disaster causes enormous stress and horrible shock

Various symptoms occur in your mind and body.  
<Stress Reaction >



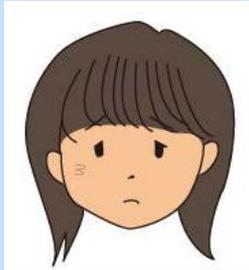
"I feel terrible."

You can't **release** stress normally.

# Various stress reactions

## Body

- Waking up often or difficulty sleeping at night
- Having no appetite
- Having a stomachache or a headache
- Feeling tired



## Feelings

- Scared and Worried
- Irritated
- Depressed
- Loss of emotion
- Loss of motivation
- Lonely



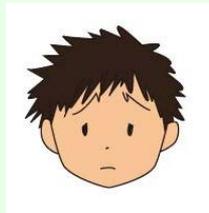
## Behavior

- Becoming restless
- Frolicking (become too excited)
- Becoming short-tempered
- Becoming childish
- Social withdrawal



## Thought process

- Loss of concentration
- Having difficulty gathering thoughts
- Remembering some events suddenly
- Having difficulty remembering
- Becoming forgetful
- Self-reproachful thinking



# The stress reaction in the body

## ① Sleeping problems

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Fearful dreams or crying during the night
- Waking up many times during the night
- Not feeling rested



## ② Eating problems

- Loss of appetite
- Overeating
- Meals don't taste good

## ③ Other problems

- Stomachache or feeling nauseous
- Constipation or diarrhea lasting many days
- Headache or feeling heavy-headed
- Feeling tired
- Feeling suffocated
- Feeling like your body is always shaking



# Behavioral Reactions

## ① Becoming restless or too excited

- Fidgeting or moving around needlessly
- Becoming over-excited or hyperactive

## ② Becoming short-tempered

- Getting angry easily
- Becoming violent (such as being aggressive or breaking things)

## ③ Becoming childish

- Wanting to cling to parents and sleep with them
- Refusing to do things they used to do alone such as going to the bathroom, taking a bath, or changing clothes
- Becoming unreasonable
- Wetting the bed

## ④ Social withdrawal

- Staying at home (and not going out)
- Refusing to go to school or work



# Emotional Reactions

## ① Fear or anxiety

- Feeling nervous and scared by sounds or dark places.
- Feeling scared to be alone and anxious without reason.

## ② Irritation

- Becoming irritated easily.
- Always feeling grouchy.
- Feeling like you always have to do something.

## ③ Depression

- Feeling down and depressed.
- Feeling sad and crying suddenly.

## ④ Loss of emotion

- Rarely feeling either happy or sad.

## ⑤ Loss of motivation

- No desire to do anything, even the things enjoyed before.

## ⑥ Loneliness

- Feeling all alone.



# Thought Process Reactions

## ① Loss of concentration

- Inability to concentrate on schoolwork or play.
- Feeling of spacing out or always thinking about other things.

## ② Difficulty gathering ideas

- Feeling anxious and having a hard time organizing ideas.
- Difficulty making decisions due to lack of confidence in ideas.
- Thinking negatively.

## ③ Remembering some events suddenly

- Suddenly remembering some events from the disaster.
- Seeing something reminiscent of the disaster and experiencing the same feelings that occurred at that time.

## ④ Inability to remember things from the disaster or becoming forgetful

- Recall of some events from the disaster is unclear.
- Recent events are easily forgotten.

## ⑤ Blame

- Feeling like the disaster was due to some personal fault.



# What are stress reactions?

- They are natural reactions one has after receiving an abnormal shock.  
Anyone can have these reactions.  
However, the level and signs of the reactions are different depending on the person.



- They will gradually decrease as you continue to have a secure and safe life.  
Try to relax and organize the rhythm of your life as much as possible.



# Differences between younger and older children

The signs of a stress reaction are different depending on age.

## □ Characteristics of elementary school children

- They want to cling to their parents and their behavior may regress.
- They fidget and become restless.
- They sometimes say things that differ from reality.



## □ Characteristics of junior high school students

- They tend to feel depressed and show bodily symptoms.
- They avoid relationships with friends and sometimes refuse to go to school.
- They show poor performance at school.
- They sometimes become delinquent and violent.



# Characteristics of the person who has a strong stress reaction

The signs of a stress reaction differ depending on the person, even if s/he is exposed to the same disaster.

The appearance of a strong stress reaction may be characterized by the following points. Let the child consult with a person who can be trusted.

- ❑ They were very frightened or lost an important person or things in a disaster.
- ❑ They were trapped in a collapsed building or house for a long time.
- ❑ They are by nature easily scared or a worrier.
- ❑ They had difficulty socializing with others before the disaster.
- ❑ They have a fear of school, a tendency to anger easily, or a developmental disorder (specifically a tendency towards autism).
- ❑ They don't have enough support from their family or other people.
- ❑ They had a shocking experience before the disaster.

# How to deal with stress



# How to reduce stress reactions

## ❑ Secure and safe feelings

Children feel better and cheer up when they have a time and place where they can communicate and laugh with others.

## ❑ An emotional bond with other people

They should try to strengthen the bonds they have with people they are close to, like friends and family, to help remind them that they are not alone.

They can build close ties with others through study, work, and activities in their communities.



## ❑ Expression of feelings

They should be encouraged to freely express true feelings, such as sadness, anger, frustration, happiness, and so on.

They don't have to hold back tears and pretend to be OK.

They should not be forced to express their feelings.

# How to deal with children who have stress reactions

- ❑ **Scolding and encouraging are forbidden**  
Statements like “Do not complain,” “Do your best,” or “You'll forget it soon” make it hard for children to express their feelings easily and causes their stress reactions to linger longer.
- ❑ **Let children express their feelings in a safe and secure environment**  
It is important for the family and the teachers at school to let the child express their feelings normally.  
Keep in mind that stress reactions are natural and transient.
- ❑ **Go to a medical agency if necessary**  
Consult a medical agency if the child becomes severely confused or if symptoms like sleeplessness or anorexia persist for more than a month.

# Teachers are victims as well

**A teacher should understand his/her own stress reactions, prepare for long-term effects from a disaster, and rest as much as possible.**

- ❑ Be careful not to collapse due to fatigue.**
- ❑ Try to rest as much as you can.**
- ❑ Sleep and eat regularly to handle the fatigue from hard work.**
- ❑ Don't carry the burden all by yourself, but talk with your boss and colleagues instead.**
- ❑ Take time to relax once a day (taking time for tea, a bath, a nap, and so on).**

# Life after the disaster

Immediately after the disaster, you feel tense and can exert all your strength without a rest.

However, you may suddenly get sick because you have become exhausted without noticing.

Try to **“eat, sleep, and talk to someone”** when you feel stressed.

## ① Take a rest frequently.

- Decide the time to take a nap.
- Take a relaxing bath when possible.

## ② Sleep more than 5 hours a day.

- Lie down to rest your body even if you cannot sleep.



**③ Eat and drink sufficiently**

- Don't forget to eat meals regularly.
- Try to eat something even if you have no appetite.

**④ Be careful about drinking too much alcohol.**

- Try not to depend on alcohol when you feel anxious and can't sleep because you risk becoming an alcoholic.

**⑤ Talk with someone if you feel anxiety.**

- Anyone can feel anxious and get sick after a disaster.  
Take time to chat with someone you can trust when you feel anxious.



# What to do in such a case?

Children feel relaxed and recover feelings of safety and cheerfulness when adults treat **them with a calm and warm attitude.**

## ❑ No appetite

- Let them eat or drink whatever they can at the time, without forcing them.
- Let them drink fluids frequently even if they have no appetite.

## ❑ Can't sleep or wake up at night

- Don't scold the child
- Sleep together with the child.
- Make the room a little brighter.
- Consult with a medical agency **if** they cannot sleep for more than a week.

❑ **Complaining about health problems**

Giving children first-aid treatment that eases their pain, even if only for a short while, and listening to them talk lets children feel more at ease.

In addition, it is important to go to a medical institution if necessary.

❑ **Talk repeatedly about the disaster**

Even adults are likely to feel uneasy and say “forget about it” when they hear the same story many times, but children’s mental pain is healed when adults calmly listen to them talk.

**Acknowledge the children’s feelings and say something like “It’s hard to remember such painful events, isn’t it?”**



# What to do in such a case?

## ❑ **Playing disaster game**

Although it may seem inappropriate, children's pain can be healed by playing a disaster game. Don't stop them, but tell them something considerate such as, "You were shocked by such a huge earthquake. That was terrible, wasn't it?" However, when children can't stop the game by themselves even if they feel pain, invite them to play something else.

## ❑ **Clinging to you like a small child**

It is okay to interact with them as usual, so take some time to play with the children.

By spoiling them a little, their hearts are healed and little by little they regain their cheerfulness.

## ❑ Blaming themselves

Sometimes children tend to think “I did something wrong and as punishment I experienced a disaster.”

You should tell them it was a natural disaster and praise them for their efforts, hard work, and good points.

## ❑ Excessive hyperactivity and behaving as if nothing happened

Both express children's efforts to cope with the disaster, although they have difficulty accepting it in their minds. Say something like “It’s hard, isn’t it?” and look after them.



# What to do in such a case?

- ❑ **Worrying that one's stress reactions are different from others'**  
Some children think they're strange when their stress reactions are different from others'.

Tell them, "It's natural that stress reactions are different for each person. It will not continue for a long time."

Consult with a medical agency when the symptoms continue for more than a month.

## ☑ Point

When children see a lot of scenes of the disaster through media such as TV, they become more anxious. Take the news time into consideration, and make it **a time to play.**



# Care in school life

**We can utilize the characteristics of a teacher for care in school life.**

- ❑ **Reach out to and converse with children frequently**  
Children's minds calm down through resuming an ordinary everyday life, such as seeing each other, exchanging greetings, and having normal conversations.
- ❑ **Notice changes in children's condition**  
Although children may seem okay, sometimes they have a serious mental wound and a sense of loss.  
Observe the mental state of the children carefully.
- ❑ **Mental care through playing and working**  
Children can ease the tension in their minds by feeling an "emotional bond" with other people through playing and working together.

# Points to remember about care in school life

- ❑ **Take age into consideration when coping with children**
  - Older children are less likely to show stress symptoms. Reach out to them while paying attention to small changes in their condition.
  - Interact with them according to their ages.
  
- ❑ **Observe their changes over a long period of time**
  - Sometimes stress symptoms appear delayed and may even occur exactly one year after a disaster. We need to observe the progress of children's condition for several years.
  
- ❑ **Cooperate with parents, experts, and medical agencies**
  - At home, a different reaction from those observed at school may appear. Keep in touch with parents.
  - Consult with an expert and a medical agency if the child shows symptoms for more than a month or if the condition becomes worse.

## ○ Breathing Relaxation

- ① Sit upright and naturally in a comfortable position.  
You can close your eyes or leave them open.
- ② Inhale deeply, easily, and comfortably into your abdomen.
- ③ Breathe slowly in through your nose and out from your mouth.
- ④ Again, breathe in, count 1,2,3, pause a little, breathe out, count 6,7,8,9,10 ~.
- ⑤ You can breathe in naturally after breathing out.
- ⑥ Again, breathe in and out deeply, easily, and comfortably.
- ⑦ Imagine that you are relieved from tiredness and nervousness when you breathe out.
- ⑧ Continue in your own pace for awhile.  
~ after about a minute ~
- ⑨ Stretch out your whole body.  
Move your neck and shoulders, and move both legs.  
Breath relaxation is over.



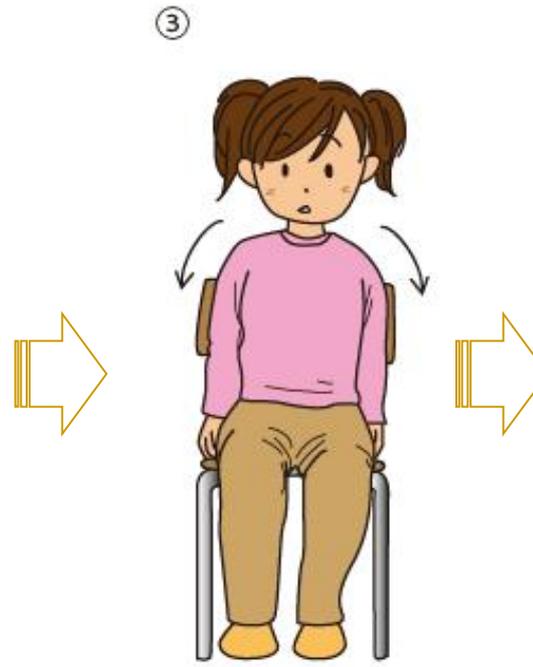
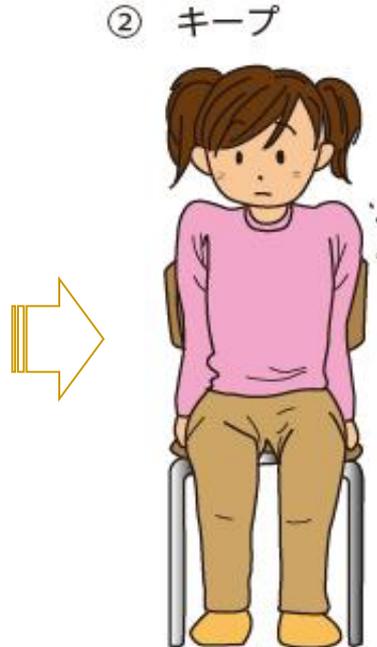
## A relaxation method for shoulders (sitting on a chair )

① Raise your shoulders straight while sitting on a chair. Take care not to bend your back.

② Raise shoulders until they start feeling tense, slowly count from 1 to 5 while breathing in and out slowly.

③ Then, lower your shoulders, while counting from 1 to 10.

④ Keep your shoulders down for a while. Feel your body relax. Do this practice two or three times.



## A relaxation method for upper parts of the body ( sitting on a chair )

① Make fists on your knees.  
Clench fists.  
⇒Tense the muscles in your hands and forearms. Pay attention to the feeling of strength.

② While firmly keeping the strength in your arms, bend your elbows and bring them close to your body.  
⇒Keeping the muscles in your arms tense, pay attention to the feeling of strength.

③ While keeping the strength in your arms, tense your shoulders and raise them straight.  
⇒ Keeping the power in your arms and shoulders, pay attention to the feeling of strength.

④ While keeping your shoulders up, expand your chest a little.  
⇒Pay attention to the feeling of strength in your whole upper body.



- ⑤ Count slowly from 1 to 5, keeping your upper body as it is. Don't hold your breath. Pay attention to the feeling of strength.

- ⑥ Relax your upper body quickly. Pay attention to the soft feeling after relaxing. After relaxing, stay like this while feeling your body for a while (about a minute).

## Finish with a refreshed feeling

- Form the signs rock, paper, rock, and paper, again and again. Bend and stretch your arms several times.

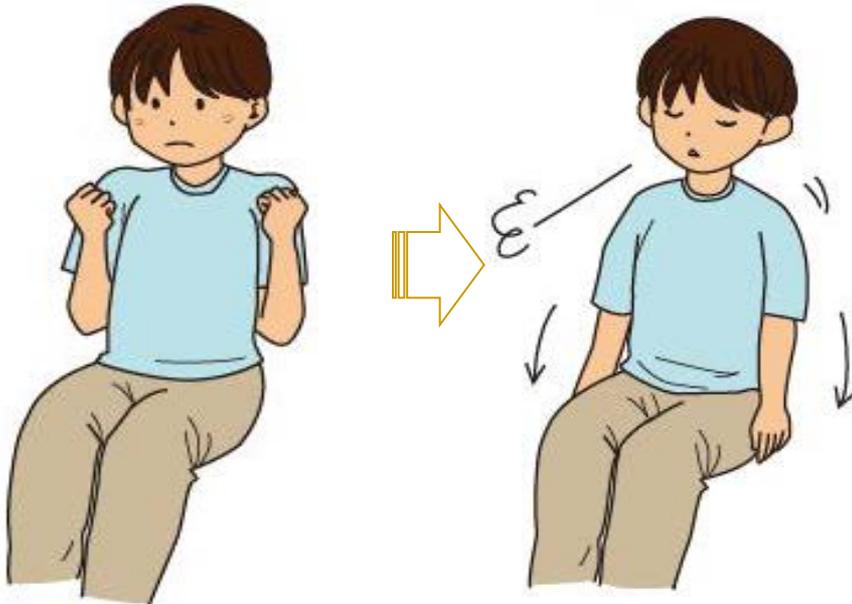


- Stretch your whole body. Stretch your arms and legs and feel refreshed.



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⑥



### ☑ Point

If children become uneasy instead of relaxing, don't force or scold them. Say something like "Try this when you think you can do it," or "It would be nice to find a better method."

# **Mental Care for Children after Disasters for Teachers and School Nurses**

**(Mental Care Committee after disasters in Shizuoka Clinical Psychologist Association)**

## **Coauthors**

Tomoko Kobayashi, Ph.D    Professor at Shizuoka University  
Masamichi Nakagaki    Shizuoka Prefecture Fuji Child Guidance Center  
Yayoi Yoshinaga    Shizuoka-City Child & Youth Counseling Center  
Hisako Imaki    Shizuoka Prefecture Yoshiwara School (School for Mentally Disabled Children)  
Yasuyuki Nagashima    Mitagahara Hospital  
Reiko Ishikawa    Shizuoka Prefecture School Counselor

## **Illustrated**

by Tomoko Takahashi, Professor at Shizuoka University  
Mistuko Miwa, Ryosuke Takahashi, Hitomi Nagashima, Eri Yamashita, students at Shizuoka University

## **English translation**

by Shizuno Seki, Lecturer at Shizuoka University  
Takako Kozima, Lecturer at Shizuoka University  
Heike Walter, International student at Shizuoka University from Bonn University  
Nicholas Gran, International student at Shizuoka University from University of Nebraska - Omaha

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In cooperation with Yoshinari Hayashi, Ph.D    Shizuoka University Disaster Prevention Center

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836 Ohya Surugaku Shizuoka city, Shizuoka prefecture 422-8529, Japan