

Jessica E Killebrew, PsyD

Gertie Breffle MA

Kaily Ritz, MA

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Building Resilience Moving Through Crisis

Discussing the Fire with Children

It's hard to know where to even begin when something this devastating happens. This article, written by local Boulder psychotherapists, is aimed at providing some language and tools around the "Where to begin". It pertains to the cycle of resolution and grief as families navigate the aftermath of the Marshall Fire.

It may look as though your child is unaffected in some moments, especially in the beginning. Knowing how to hold space can be difficult. There are ways to activate ours and our children's natural capacity for resilience to move through crisis and skillfully manage the impacts of events such as a fire of this magnitude.

The article was inspired after connecting with one of the affected families and the common bewilderment of where to start the healing process. We thought we were just bringing donations by. However, what ended up unfolding was a rich community exchange full of care that catalyzed this. We hope you find it a helpful springboard for your healing process. Our hearts are with you.



Prior to talking

Before you start talking with your child, here are some helpful things to keep in mind.

1. Set aside an intentional time to “talk”, a moment where your child is able to listen better and you are less likely to be interrupted.
2. Be prepared to hold space for your child by leaving room for interaction (Q&A, comments, etc.). This is part of digestion.
3. Be equally prepared to stop the discussion should your child express being overstimulated or wanting to end the conversation. We all need to honor our own pace.
4. Get grounded first. It is not only natural but important to be human in front of your child by expressing feelings. It is also key to hold space and leave emotional room for their processing. This can be difficult to navigate of course. Regardless of what happens, coming back to a regulated state by just pausing and breathing can be a powerful way to teach our little humans. *Children are, for a large part, borrowing their parents’ nervous systems.*
5. Own your feelings and help your child name theirs. This helps avoid projection and prescribing reality. It honors their meaning making process and integrity.
6. Get creative and flow with it. Children respond especially well to metaphor and simplicity.
7. Drop the expectation – little humans don’t necessarily conceptualize, process or cope the same, developmentally. Welcome the unfolding even if it doesn’t look like what you had in mind.
8. Welcome all feelings (your own included)! Humans experience grief differently. There is no “right way”. *Aim for non-judgment and acceptance.*

Helpful Concepts

Here are some key ideas to keep in mind as you are working with your child.

Speak to the Cycle

Like nature, overwhelming events and grief have cycles: There is usually some kind of beginning, middle, and end. In fact, this is part of encoding experiences as a memory. It can be very useful to speak in these terms. It helps us work through and find resolution and can help activate the body's natural capacities for resilience.

Impermanence

Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. This happened but it won't define us forever. It has a cycle. This will change.

Languaging

Speak to the specific incident i.e.) "The Marshall Fire". Acknowledge this is something that doesn't happen everyday to establish safety and minimize generalizing. "It's very hard to be prepared for these types of situations, but we did the best we could".

Safety

You are safe. It is over. There was a beginning middle and end, and you are safe now.

Keep open

"We can come back to this at any time". "We/I am here and you can talk to us anytime (also to your teacher, school counselor etc)".

Take Care of Yourself

Using the metaphor of the oxygen mask – put yours on first so you can breathe/help your family more efficiently, deeply. You are a much better resource when you are working your own healing process, staying grounded, sourcing your own wisdom and have a full cup.

Key Elements

When we experience overwhelm and trauma as humans, we have a need to reestablish safety, and mobilize toward safety. We can do so by seeking *community* to help each other through. This helps us activate resilience and move toward resolution. Mobilization and movement, moving together toward safety and reestablishing safety as a community (helping each other out with moving to resources) assists in completing these cycles and activating the body's capacity for resilience and resolution.

The Beginning

This is the start of a process; we are in the beginning. It just happened and it's not only normal but healthy to talk about all your feelings. It is also okay not to feel anything at times! The beginning may be overwhelming. It won't be new forever. Feelings will change over time. "We are all going through this together" (eliminates personalization of the event).

**Validate and normalize any emotions that arise (anger, apathy, etc.). It can be so comforting to be allowed to just feel the feelings! It is elemental to the grief process. *We have what we need inside of us to get through this even if you can't feel it right now.*

The Middle

There will be rebuilding, a time where it won't look like the beginning anymore. Humans are resilient, all humans go through hard times where things happen, outside of our choice. While we have no choice they happen to us, we do have a choice about how we handle them and what attitude we have about them (shifting from a victim state to empowerment/mobilization). We can and will get through this. This part of the process involves movement. We must catalyze at some point to engage in the process of resolve.

The End

Resolution can help activate the body's natural capacities for resilience, the ability to bounce back. The memories will be with us, and we cannot change what happened. However, there will be something else in its place that we may (eventually) find meaning and even joy in (a new home, a community that rebuilds). Creating meaning that weaves a common narrative can be very healing.

Coping Tools

Children can take longer to process initially. Sometimes you can see behaviors such as acting out that happen much later (6months+ down the road). Be patient, the coping and the process unfold but it takes time.

Visiting the site If (IF) this is something your child is interested in, and open to, this may be useful in the cycle (with support and processing post visit). Seeing the remains of your old life can be a catalyst to healing and the grief process. It fills in the story (after you left the scene) and can help them/everyone gain a sense of closure.

Encourage talking with friends, teachers, family, community members – your dog or dolls even!

Community Crisis is a time to practice needing and being needed, to feel interconnectivity - - we are not alone in this! There is nothing like a crisis to bring humanity together. We can gather, care for one another and nurture each other. We are interdependent creatures. A brilliant, symbiotic way to build resilience for you, your child/ren and your community.

Self-Care “When I feel sad or scared, sometimes I like to... wrap myself in a blanket/pet my dog/read a book/take a walk”. You can model this as you conduct your own self-care (and talk about “mommy/daddy feels XYZ so I am laying down for a bit).

Art and creative means These are great ways to channel any feelings during this time. i.e.) Break out the clay/paint/figurines/doll house/legos, let them come up with the “how to” part. Try not to ask questions, just sit back and notice/observe if you can.

If a child does not want to do art about/talk about the situation, art can be used as a calming activity (painting a safe place or doodling).

An organized art activity is also a way to extend kindness and compassion for others while engaging their own healing process (children can make art/cards for their friends or for families who may have been impacted). This builds a feeling of community and can reduce potential helplessness around natural disasters.

Ritual Create a space for the whole family to light a candle and put special objects.

Family Jar A jar to put worries, gratitudes, or just a feeling word on paper can move something internal, outward so it can be looked at differently.

More Coping Tools

Mindfulness Creating a reduction of noise and stimulation, a time to take “breaks” from “doing” and just “be” are essential to the unfolding of resolution and grief. A space where your child/ren and you/your partner can pay attention to one thing that is happening in the moment (watching clouds, snuggling, getting down on their level and holding hands, just breathing or listening to sounds) so that thoughts and feelings can arise naturally and move through us.

Nature Get outside! Let mindfulness happen naturally! Earth has a way of inherently healing.

Movement Move! Shake, dance, jump, skip, wiggle, play, stretch, move the energy! Really, any kind of rhythmic movement or bilateral stimulation help to process the experience, using what the body already tends to do, naturally.

Helping children name their emotions (charts and books can be helpful).

Helping locate emotions in the body (you can use a picture, and put colors/textures to where they feel the emotions).

Telling stories about and around what happened.

Staying connected and doing something special with your littles.

Finally, follow up with a family/child therapist and leave room for acting out now – and down the road.

Much of the coping we mention, particularly, connecting, validating, and making sense of the story and moving together toward resolution, allows for the emotional right brain when it experiences intense, overwhelming experiences to organize, and shift over to involve the logical left brain. Then your child can make sense of the experience and store it in an organized way.

Resources

Resources drawn on for this article include many current trauma researcher's work.

Peter Levine "Healing Trauma" and Bessel Van der Kolk "The Body Keeps the Score".

Connecting to Calm by Dan Siegel and dozens of other short video resources on working with challenging/big emotions with kids
[https://upfind.me/dan-siegel-connecting-to-calm/?filter-types=\[article,ebook,visual\]](https://upfind.me/dan-siegel-connecting-to-calm/?filter-types=[article,ebook,visual])

Good Enough Parenting in Times of Crisis
<https://theallendercenter.org/2020/04/good-enough-parenting-crisis/>

Transforming 'Pandemic Panic' into Receptive Presence and Growth with Dan Siegel
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIKUYmIE_0o

Kids in The House: Parenting resource with short videos, for all kinds of subjects with all developmental ages
<https://www.kidsinthehouse.com>

Healing Trauma written and narrated by Peter Levine
<https://youtu.be/PEf9KI4SWM8>

Cosmic Kids Yoga and "Zen Den"
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8snGkhBF7ngDp1oJtx5VcjwatxZn8xLK>

About the authors

Jessica Killebrew, Psy.D. Graduated from California School of Professional Psychology in 2012 with a doctorate in Clinical Psychology. Her emphasis is in Integrative Psychology with a specialization in Mindfulness-Based Interventions and works primarily with adult populations as a psychotherapist in Boulder Colorado. She is a Louisville resident.
Jessica@drjessicakillebrew.com | www.drjessicakillebrew.com

Gertie Breffle, M.A. Graduated from Naropa University in 2016 with a Masters of Arts in Transpersonal Counselling Psychology. She specializes in trauma and relationships working primarily with adults, couples, teens, and families as a Licensed Professional Counselor in Boulder, Colorado. She is a Longmont resident.
Gertieb@gertiebrefflecounseling.com | www.gertiebrefflecounseling.com.

Kaily Ritz, M.A. Graduated from Naropa University in 2018 with a Masters of Arts in Mental Health Counseling and Art Therapy. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor and works with multiple population ranges. She is a Boulder resident.
Kailyr@insightpsychotherapy.clinic