



# Supporting Children and Young People after the Crans Montana Fire

A guide for parents and carers

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## Purpose of this document

This document is intended to support parents and carers in responding to the impact of the fire in Crans-Montana on New Year's Eve. Children and young people may have been affected in different ways. Some may be grieving the death of someone they knew, others may have been injured, witnessed the event, or been close to it. Many may also be affected indirectly through exposure to distressing information, media coverage, or the emotional responses of friends, family members, and the wider community.

This guidance aims to help parents and carers:

- Recognise common signs of distress and trauma in children and young people.
- Understand how reactions may differ by age and stage of development.
- Support children and young people in calm, age-appropriate, and reassuring ways.
- Know when and where to seek additional support.

## Understanding reactions to traumatic events

Children and young people respond to frightening or distressing events in different ways depending on their age, personality, previous experiences, and level of exposure. Reactions may appear immediately or emerge weeks later.

There is no single "right" way to respond. Many emotional, physical, behavioural, and social reactions fall within the range of the normal stress response and will lessen over time, especially when young people feel safe, supported, and able to talk to a trusted adult.

However, for some, reactions may be more intense, persist for longer, or begin to interfere with daily life. Recognising when this is happening is important.

## Common signs of distress in children and young people aged 12-25

Young people aged 12–25 may show distress in a variety of ways, including:

### Emotional reactions

- Sadness, tearfulness, or emotional withdrawal.
- Anxiety, fear, or heightened worry about safety.
- Irritability, anger, or mood swings.
- Feelings of guilt (e.g. "I should have done something").

### Behavioural reactions

- Avoidance of reminders, places, or conversations.
- Difficulty concentrating or disengagement from school or work.
- Changes in attendance or motivation.
- Anger outbursts or anti-social behaviour.
- Regressive or more child-like behaviour.
- Risk-taking behaviours or substance use (particularly in older adolescents and young adults).

### Physical reactions

- Fatigue, headaches, stomach aches.
- Sleep difficulties or nightmares.
- Restlessness or heightened alertness.
- Changes in appetite.

### Social reactions

- Withdrawing from friends or family.
- Increased conflict with others.
- Increased need for reassurance.

## What can help in the coming weeks

In the weeks ahead, small, everyday actions can support emotional recovery for both children and adults. There is no right way to cope; people may find different things helpful at different times.

- Talk about what has happened, when it feels right. Some children and young people may want to talk; others may prefer to express themselves in different ways.
- Encourage expression of emotions through drawing, music, writing, journalling, or play. Creative activities can help externalise thoughts and feelings when words are hard to find.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible. Returning to familiar activities, school, work, mealtimes, and bedtimes can help restore a sense of stability and normality.
- Build in choice, control, and agency, especially for children and young people. Simple decisions (what to eat, what activity to do, plans for the weekend) can help restore a sense of control.
- Stay connected. Limit long periods of isolation where possible and encourage time with friends, family, and trusted people.
- Support physical wellbeing, including sleep, regular meals, movement, exercise, mindfulness, and time in nature. These all support emotional regulation.
- Consider community and collective rituals such as remembrance gatherings, signing condolence books, or community activities. These can reduce isolation and provide a sense of shared support. It is important to listen to yourself (and your child) and decide what feels helpful; participation should always be a personal choice.
- Look after yourself as a parent or carer. Talk about your own emotions with people you trust or a professional, use creative outlets if helpful, and make space for activities that help you feel grounded. Supporting yourself helps you support your child.

Recovery takes time. Be patient with yourself and with your child and seek additional support if worries or distress do not ease.

## Managing exposure to distressing information

Repeated exposure to distressing news, images, or social media can increase anxiety and emotional overwhelm for both children and young people.

Parents and carers can help by:

- Limiting exposure to news and graphic content.
- Being mindful of adult conversations children may overhear.
- Encouraging breaks from social media when needed.
- Reassuring children and young people that it is okay to step away from upsetting content.

## Having supportive conversations with children and young people aged 12-25

Supportive conversations are not about “fixing” the problem, but about offering connection, understanding, and reassurance where possible.

### Principles for supportive conversations

- Stay calm, present, and non-judgmental.
- Choose a quiet, private moment if possible.
- Allow your child or young person to talk at their own pace.
- Acknowledge feelings and validate their experience.
- Avoid pressing for details about the event.

### Helpful ways to start the conversation

- “I wanted to check in with you because this has been a difficult time.”
- “I’ve noticed you seem a bit quieter than usual. How have things been feeling for you?”
- “Some people have been affected by what happened in Crans-Montana. I’m here if you want to talk.”

#### During the conversation

- Listen more than you speak.
- Acknowledge feelings: "That sounds really upsetting."
- Normalise reactions without minimising them: "Many people react differently after something like this."
- Reassure the young person they are not alone and support is available.

#### Avoid

- Making assumptions about how they feel.
- Saying "everything will be fine" or "try not to think about it".
- Sharing unverified information or graphic details about the incident.
- Forcing the young person to talk if they are not ready.

## Supporting primary school children aged 5-11: key differences

Younger children often express distress differently from adolescents and young adults. They may have fewer words to explain how they feel and may show distress through behaviour, play, or physical symptoms.

#### How children aged 5-11 may show distress

- Increased clinginess or separation anxiety.
- Temper tantrums or avoidance behaviour.
- Regression (e.g. bedwetting, baby talk, thumb-sucking).
- Play that repeats themes of danger, fire, or loss.
- Physical complaints (tummy aches, headaches) with no clear medical cause.
- Difficulty concentrating or increased irritability.

#### How to support younger children

- Use simple, concrete language.
- Reassure safety without giving frightening or graphic details.
- Maintain routines as much as possible.
- Allow expression through play, drawing, or stories.
- Help identify triggers, gently ask what they are afraid of, and reassure them they are safe.
- Avoid reprimanding regressive or "babyish" behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, misbehaving).

#### Helpful phrases for younger children

- *"It sounds like this has been worrying you."*
- *"You can talk to me anytime you feel upset."*
- *"Lots of children feel different feelings after something scary happens."*

## When to seek additional support

Some children and young people may need professional support, particularly if their reactions are intense, persistent, or worsening. As a general guide, concerns increase if significant distress:

- Continues beyond several weeks with little sign of improvement, or
- Interferes with daily functioning (learning, relationships, school attendance, or self-care).

While it is common for stress reactions to last days or weeks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is typically considered when symptoms persist for around one month or more and cause ongoing impairment. Early support can reduce the risk of longer-term difficulties.

#### Immediate professional help is required if a child or young person:

- Appears overwhelmed or unable to cope.
- Shows ongoing or escalating distress over time.
- Mentions self-harm, hopelessness, feeling unsafe, or not wanting to be alive.

## Swiss local/national support resources

Ambulance: 144

### For young people

147 – Youth Helpline (Pro Juventute)

- Free, confidential support by phone, chat, WhatsApp and email
- Available 24/7
- <https://www.147.ch/fr/>

Ciao

- A space for young people to ask questions and get information anonymously
- <https://www.ciao.ch/>

Ontécoute

- An anonymous and free space for 18–25-year-olds to ask questions to professionals
- <https://www.ontecoute.ch/>

### For adults

143 – Adult Helpline (La Main Tendue/Die Dargebotene Hand)

- Free, anonymous emotional support
- Available in German, French, Italian 24/7
- <https://www.143.ch/fr/>

Heart2Heart

- Dedicated English language service of 143
- Available 18:00-23:00 daily
- <https://www.143.ch/en/>
- Call 0800 143 000

SantéPsy

- Information about mental health including addresses and resources for support
- <https://santepsy.ch/>

## Accessing further professional help

- Finding a psychologist: [www.psychologie.ch](http://www.psychologie.ch)
- Finding a counsellor: [www.sgfb.ch/en/](http://www.sgfb.ch/en/)
- Finding a psychiatrist/psychotherapist for young people: [www.sqkipp.ch](http://www.sqkipp.ch)
- Finding a psychiatrist/psychotherapist for adults: [www.psychiatrie.ch](http://www.psychiatrie.ch)

## Further resources and training

Adolescence is a critical and vulnerable phase of life, especially after traumatic events. Many mental health conditions begin before adulthood, yet signs of distress in young people are often overlooked or misunderstood. Silence and stigma can deepen suffering; early support makes a real difference.

This is where [ensa Mental Health First Aid \(Focus Youth\)](#) can help. The course equips parents, teachers, and other professionals with practical skills to recognise mental health problems and crises in adolescents, approach young people with empathy and without judgement, and encourage timely professional support.

A valuable resource for parents and carers committed to supporting young people's wellbeing in challenging times. Find out more: <https://ensa.swiss/en/youth/course/?en=on>

## Final note

Parents and carers play a vital role in helping children and young people feel safe and supported after distressing events. Compassionate, consistent responses and seeking professional help when needed can significantly reduce long-term impact.

- Encourage ongoing, routine check-ins rather than one-off conversations.
- Be alert to delayed distress (which may appear weeks later).
- Respond immediately to any concerns about harm, self-harm, or safety.

If you are unsure or worried, reaching out for advice is a positive and protective step.