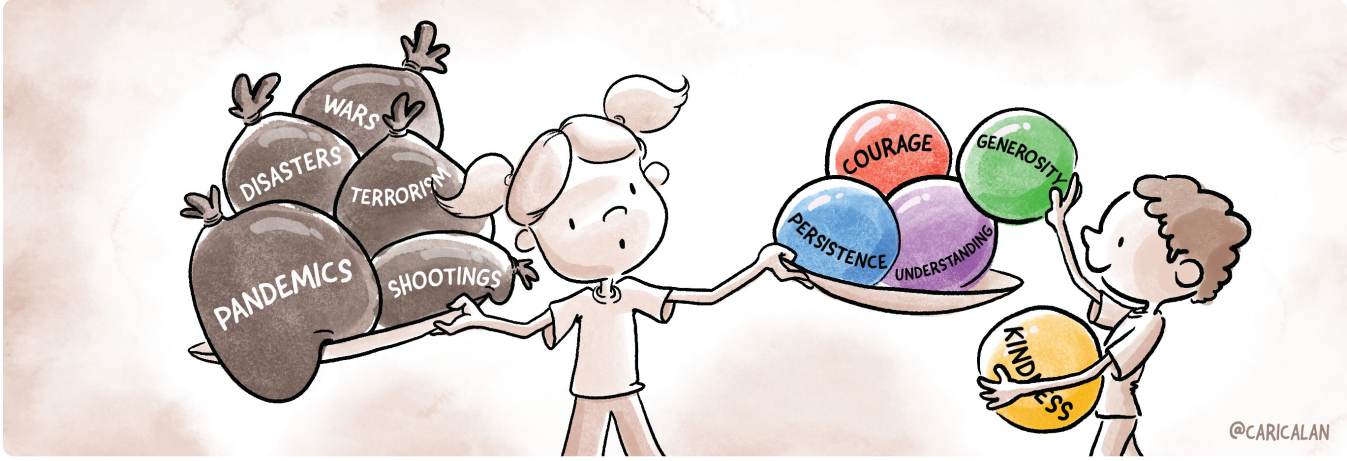
More Big Bad News

A Centering Resource • By Marisol Muñoz-Kiehne, PhD



There's a lot of bad news everywhere these days! Big bad news with big bad names: **pandemics, disasters, wars, terrorism, shootings**. I don't know what's going on, but I know how I feel, and I'm learning what I can do about it.

When I ask why all this is happening, Dad says that it is complicated, that nobody quite understands nature, humans or human nature, and that some bad things just happen. Mom says that people sometimes cause harm or hurt when they don't understand something or disagree with someone. I don't get it. At school, we're taught that when we don't understand something we should ask questions, and when we disagree with somebody we are supposed to use our words and try to work it out. We get in trouble if we get upset or act out.

Nowadays, it looks like people all over are freaking and fighting, balking and bullying.

It's **confusing**. It doesn't make sense. I have many questions. And sometimes I don't remember stuff I know. Lately I've been thinking a lot about the bad news, even when I should be paying attention to something else. Every now and then, the words, pictures and sounds from the news come to my mind out of the blue. It's messing with my head!

Deadly viruses, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, bombings, random shootings... Scary news! I'm jumpy, and I don't feel really safe anywhere anymore, not even at school or at the movies. I'm **afraid** of being alone, and I don't want to be away from my family.

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ISBN: 978-1-56123-281-9
Rev: 20-05-05

Sometimes I have a feeling that something or somebody is about to hurt us. I **worry** about many things, like about my best friend and his family. They were getting bullied because of their religion, so they had to move away. My uncle is in the military, and I fear he's going to get killed any day. And I fret about my parents and grandparents getting a bad virus and dying soon. I'm stressed out!

It's not fair. It makes me **angry**. I know I've been cranky lately. Thinking about the bad news puts me in a bad mood. And I'm not the only one. Everyone seems to be snapping and yelling for no reason. Kids have been getting into fights more. Then they get in trouble and it all gets worse. It's not our fault. It's just not fair!

The bad news makes me **sad** too. Sometimes I tear up when I watch, hear or read about the latest pandemics, disasters, wars, terrorist attacks and shootings. I cry when I see people crying. The other day, Mom started sobbing when she was talking with Grandma. They said that it's heart-breaking that many kids could not have their parents around anymore. It makes me so very sad that the bad news hurts people so badly.

Sometimes I don't feel much at all. I don't feel like doing anything or going anyplace. I guess I get tired of feeling **confused, scared, worried, mad and sad.**

The bad news is making me feel **sick**. I get headaches and stomachaches. I have trouble falling asleep at night and have nightmares about the news. The next day, I'm tired and groggy. I don't think I'm really sick, I just don't feel well.

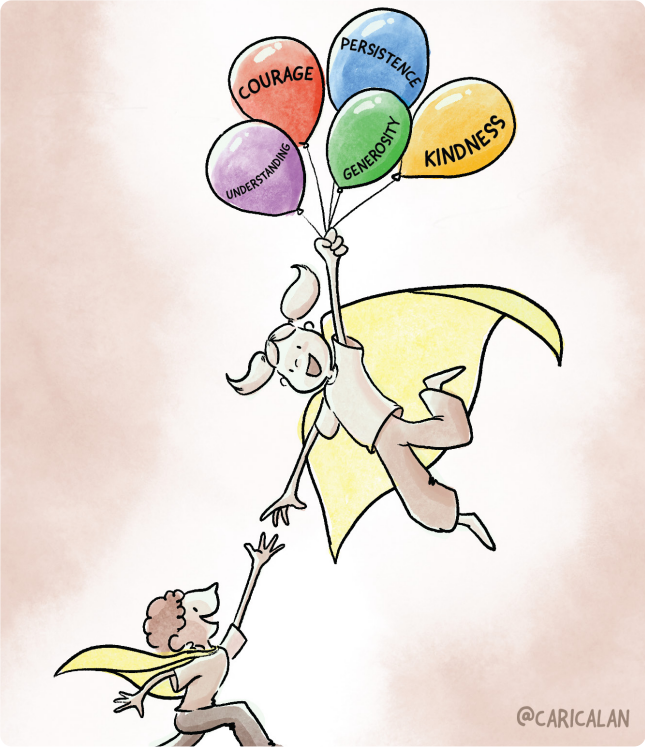
So I'm trying to figure out what makes me **feel better**. I feel better when I'm around people who care about me and can take **care** of me. It's good to know how I can reach my family when we're not together. We practice **safety plans**, and that reminds me what we can do to stay safe.

It helps to **talk** to my family, my teachers and my friends. I don't know how it works, but sometimes just talking makes me feel better. I like it when people listen to me and answer my questions. But I've noticed that sometimes people make up answers when they really don't know what to say. I'd rather they told me the plain truth.

I don't want to think and talk about the bad news all the time. So I keep doing what I like to do and what makes me feel okay, like **playing** games and sports, **drawing**, listening to **music** and just hanging out with **my friends, my dog and my cat.**

At **school,** we discuss current events, write letters and make posters about the bad news. At **church,** we have special activities and prayers. In my **neighborhood,** I help with donations and collections. Doing all this makes me feel better, and shows that **I can do something to make things better.**

Many people are doing things to make things better. I like to learn about those who work responding in emergencies and hard times.



Real superheroes! And it's good to know that regular people are joining forces and helping each other in many ways, resisting and persisting despite the bad news. I enjoy reading stories and watching videos of all kinds of people being brave, generous and kind. It reminds me of my coach telling us, "It's not over 'til it's over. **Keep at it, don't give up!"**

So I'm not giving up, and I hope that we'll all keep at it. My teacher says that the news gets better when people figure out how to **care better and share better**. Pandemics, disasters, wars, terrorism and shootings may be part of this world and make big bad news, but **understanding, courage, persistence, generosity and kindness** are powerful superpowers. And those are **BIG GOOD NEWS!**

Express yourself: Draw your own Big Good News Superpowers

Message to Parents and Teachers

Is the Universe a friendly place, or not? Albert Einstein reportedly identified this as humanity's most pressing question. During adverse events that make "big bad news," such as pandemics, natural disasters, wars, terrorist attacks and mass shootings, we may find ourselves asking this question.

As children learn that bad things do happen, they look to us, the adults in their lives, for answers to that same question. They ask us in many ways, even if they don't come right out and say it. How should you respond? Children need us to convey to them, through words and actions, protection, connection and action.

Protection

Protection leads to safety, a fundamental universal human need. Since familiarity and predictability lead to a sense of security, during times of "big bad news" it is important to maintain routines and structure in children's environment whenever possible. For example, we may use familiar storybooks, videos, songs and prayers over and over. We may also review with the children the plans we would follow in case the "bad news" events were to affect them directly.

Given that children's reasoning and emotional regulation abilities are not fully developed, they are especially vulnerable to the effects of listening to adult conversations and to being exposed to media coverage of upsetting news. We should keep children out of discussions that may confuse or frighten them. Adults should monitor what children see, hear and read from media outlets, and then talk with them about what they have understood. Children will feel safer if they hear messages like, **"We are doing what we can to protect you,"** and **"Many people are working to keep everyone safe."**

Connection

Particularly during times of "big bad news," it is essential that children know that they are not alone, that they are connected to others, and that they are part of a family and of a larger community. Let's show and tell our children how we are available to them, even when apart, and include them when contacting significant others by phone calls, texts, email, videos, etc. Relaxed family time is especially valuable during difficult times, so we should make it a priority.

We should pay close attention to how children look, to what they say and to how they act, noticing any changes from their typical appearance and behavior. Ongoing contact and communication helps children feel connected. We can ask open questions, such as "What do you think about…?" and "How do you feel about…?" Let's listen to their statements and stories, and to the underlying beliefs and feelings while accepting a wide range of reactions to the "big bad news." We should also provide ample opportunities for children to ask questions, and respond truthfully to these at their level of understanding.

It is recommended that adults talk with children about the beliefs of their family, culture and faith. It is also important that children be involved in related customs and ceremonies. Children feel connected and reassured by messages such as, **"You/We are not alone,"** and **"We get and give help in difficult times."**

Action

It is not easy to impart determination and instill hope during times of "big bad news" yet it is crucial for the children's sake. It helps when we hold a balanced perspective that recognizes good news as well as bad news, preventing catastrophizing and protecting against helplessness and hopelessness. Let's remind children that good things still happen and that people can do good things, even during difficult times. We can offer examples of how we resist and persist in the face of adversity, heal from injury, help each other and recover from falls. It can be helpful to include children as we express hopeful views through talking, writing and symbolic rituals. And we should invite children to express and process their experiences through play, movement, art and music.

Let's show children how we can all take some action during times of "big bad news" by giving and sharing, be it donating blood, supplies or money, or by volunteering or engaging in civic or religious activism. Determination is fueled and

hope is strengthened when we communicate to children messages such as **"We'll do what we can do,"** and **"Goodness is powerful and will prevail."**

While conveying protection, connection and determination facilitates children's coping with "big bad news," as adults, **we should refrain from doing what can complicate matters or make matters worse**. For example, adults should not: lie or pretend that nothing important is happening; pressure children to talk about the bad news beyond their expressed readiness; burden children with adult concerns; expose children to excessive information; spread speculation and rumors; make unrealistic promises; act out emotions aggressively; engage in addictive behaviors; or express intolerance or hatred toward particular individuals or groups of people.

As important adults in our children's lives, our responses to the "big bad news" serve as examples to them. This is why it is crucial to be compassionate with ourselves and **model healthy ways of coping** and responding to the events. These include: practicing stress and anger management skills; tolerating and respecting differences; and reaching out for support and guidance. And when we are upset, we should let the children know that it is not their fault.

Bad news and hard times are not funny, yet sharing fun times and funny moments with children can be helpful, healing, heartening and hope-instilling.

Reactions

Each child's particular physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions to "big bad news" may be different from adults' and other children's reactions. We can expect a broad range of reactions, across time, with cultural variations.

Some common reactions are:

- **Physical**–aches and pains, muscular tension, fatigue, changes in appetite, insomnia, nightmares, bedwetting
- **Mental**–hyper-alertness, inattention, memory problems, worry, preoccupation, confusion, flashbacks
- **Emotional**–anxiety, fears, tearfulness, sadness, despair, irritability, anger, rage, numbness
- **Behavioral**–avoidance, decline in grades, regression to more immature behaviors, aggression, presence of the "bad news" events in their play

Some children are more at risk than others for developing persistent symptoms or severe problems. Some factors that can complicate children's reactions include: proximity to the adverse events; what they have seen and heard; whether they have a history of traumatic experiences in their lives; and the strength of their support network. We should seek professional help from pediatricians, trauma therapists and grief counselors if the child's reactions cause them significant distress, persist and/or significantly interfere with their typical functioning.

And let's keep in mind that caring adults are the most valuable resources for our children to be well, stay well and get well. We must take care of ourselves as well!

Dedication:

To all children everywhere,
who deserve a safe and sane world.

About the Author:

Marisol Muñoz-Kiehne PhD is a Clinical Psychologist who contributes to the well-being of children and families through teaching, writing and media outreach. As "Doctora Marisol," for 15 years she provided information and inspiration via weekly radio broadcasts/podcasts (*Nuestros Niños* and *Cuerpo Corazón Comunidad*) and TV programs/videos. She has taught at various universities, consults for nonprofit agencies, speaks at conferences and community events and writes for printed and online publications. Over a dozen of her psycho-educational books and stories for adults and children have been published. Her work has earned local, regional and national awards and the appreciation of many. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her beloved husband and cat.
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AND
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About Centering:

Centering is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to providing education and resources for the bereaved. Centering was founded in 1977 by Joy and Dr. Marvin Johnson. Centering started with nine little coloring books for hospitalized children and two workshop offerings for nurses and families. In response to the need for family and caregiver support during times of grief, Centering has developed many new resources. Centering has over 500 grief resources for children and adults. Centering continues to provide educational resources and books for caregivers and families.
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