

Talking to Children After Tragedy

voices
OF SEPTEMBER 11TH

When a tragedy occurs in your community, parents often struggle with talking to their children. Whether they see images on television or hear people talking, children are likely to know when something bad has happened. Events like these can make children feel sad or scared. Talking with them about their feelings can help.

Create a safe and reassuring atmosphere

- When children are aware that something bad has happened, let them know they can talk to you about their feelings
- Asking them about what they have heard is a good way to start
- Children may be fearful that such things could happen to them or their families. Reassure them that you will keep them as safe as possible

Children need you to tell the truth

- Answer their questions with honesty
- Explain events using words and ideas that they understand
- Don't overwhelm them with details, unless they ask for specific information
- It's OK to let children know that you too are feeling sad or anxious because of events

How can you deal with TV, internet, and other media?

- Monitor younger children's TV and online viewing. Make sure they don't watch shows or visit sites with disturbing images
- For older children or adolescents, watching TV or online news or reading the newspaper may be appropriate. Be sure to talk about what they see and hear
- Ask questions like, "What do you think about what is happening? Are you scared? Do you feel sad or angry?"

Help them cope with their feelings

- If it is hard for your children to talk about their feelings, encourage them to draw pictures, tell stories, or play with toys to express themselves and to find comfort
- During stressful times, stick to your child's regular routine. Children find comfort in what is familiar
- Doing something for the people affected by a tragedy can help children feel better. Suggest they draw a card to send, or participate in a fundraising effort
- Focus on the positive. Point out all the people who help others during an emergency

Look for signs of anxiety or fear

- Watch for:
 - Loss of appetite, stomachaches, headaches or nightmares
 - Constantly talking about scary ideas or feelings
 - Increased fighting with friends, parents or siblings
 - Fear of leaving parents, or going to school
 - Persistent signs of stress or agitation
- If your child shows any of these signs for a long period of time, consider talking with a health care professional or doctor



Information courtesy of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, American Psychological Association, and National Child Traumatic Stress Network

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Feeling Safe in Your Community

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You may be struggling to understand how such a terrible thing could happen in your community. It is typical for people to experience a variety of emotions following a traumatic event. These feelings can include shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief and others. You may find that you have trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating or remembering even simple tasks. This is common and should pass after a while. Over time, the caring support of family and friends can help to lessen the emotional impact and ultimately make the changes brought about by the tragedy more manageable. You may feel that the world is a more dangerous place today than you did yesterday. It will take some time to recover your sense of equilibrium.

Meanwhile, you may wonder how to go on living your daily life. You can strengthen your resilience — the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity — in the days and weeks ahead. Here are some tips:

Talk about it

Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen to your concerns. Receiving support and care can be comforting and reassuring. It often helps to speak with others who have shared your experience so you do not feel so different or alone.

Striving for balance

When a tragedy occurs, it's easy to become overwhelmed and have a negative or pessimistic outlook. Balance that viewpoint by reminding yourself of people and events which are meaningful and comforting, even encouraging. Striving for balance empowers you and allows for a healthier perspective on yourself and the world around you.

Turn it off and take a break

You may want to keep informed, but try to limit the amount of news you take in whether it's from the Internet, television, newspapers or magazines. While getting the news informs you, being overexposed to it can actually increase your stress. The images can be very powerful in reawakening your feeling of distress. Also, schedule some breaks to distract yourself from thinking about the incident and focus instead on something you enjoy. Try to do something that will lift your spirits.

Honor your feelings

Remember that it is common to have a range of emotions after a traumatic incident. You may experience intense stress similar to the effects of a physical injury. For example, you may feel exhausted, sore or off balance.

Take care of yourself

Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest and build physical activity into your day. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can suppress your feelings rather than help you to manage and lessen your distress. In addition, alcohol and drugs may intensify your emotional or physical pain. Establish or re-establish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation or yoga.

Help others or do something productive

Locate resources in your community on ways that you can help people who have been affected by this incident, or have other needs. Helping someone else often has the benefit of making you feel better, too.

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Talking to the Media

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Tragic events are often covered by news outlets in great detail and spread immediately through vast coverage. Local residents are often approached by the media for their personal perspective. Be aware that there are potentially positive and negative consequences of speaking to the media. A desire to speak out is important, but preparation is key.

Preparing for an Interview

- If you decide to do an interview, set boundaries and prepare a statement in advance. Be cautious about what is recorded or filmed. Once an interview is recorded, a photograph is taken, or an event filmed, you have little control over how it is used.
- Ask the reporter what the story is about so you can be prepared to discuss the topic. When possible, ask a reporter to email questions to you in advance.
- Prepare some key talking points in advance and avoid making statements in the heat of the moment.
- Come up with 3 or 4 points you would like to get across, write them down, and say them right away during the interview. For example: "The one thing I really want to say is. . . ." Return to those messages and repeat them in different forms whenever you can. Do not let the reporter derail or distract you from your original points.
- You have the ability to control the information you share. You can set limits and tell the reporter you won't discuss some things. Once you have said something to a reporter, you cannot take it back or expect them not to use it.

Saying No Is Okay

- You can refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. It is okay to say, "I cannot answer that at this moment."
- You can end an interview at any time. Try to be calm if you choose to cut the interview short.
- You can avoid a stressful atmosphere by speaking to only one reporter at a time.
- You can and should exclude young children from interviews.
- You can refuse to make your image public by conducting a television interview using a silhouette or doing a newspaper or radio interview without having your photograph taken.

Conducting the Interview

- Relax and take your time. Speak slowly and clearly.
- Listen to the entire question and make sure you understand the question before answering. Think about your answer before speaking.
- Be honest. If you don't know the answer to something, say so. If you're unsure, you can always say, "I don't have enough information to fully answer your question."
- Be consistent with your information.
- Never give false information or lie to a reporter. Likewise, do not guess or speculate about the event. Stick to what you know as fact.
- When you talk to a reporter, remember that you are also talking to everyone in their audience— possibly thousands of people.
- You can audiotape or videotape all interviews to ensure the accuracy of what you say.
- Never speak "off the record." Everything you say during an interview is on the record. Do not say anything you would not be comfortable seeing in print. Once you have answered, stop talking.



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