

Helping Teenagers Cope After a Traumatic Event

When a tragedy occurs in our midst — a school shooting, a bombing, or another act of terrorism — our first thoughts are for our children. How do we help them cope? How do we give them the support they need? There are several steps you as a parent can take to support your teenager through a terrible time.

Ways to talk with your teenager after a traumatic event

Teenagers react to trauma in many of the same ways that adults do. The world may suddenly seem dangerous and unsafe. Your teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions, and not understand how to cope with these feelings. Here is how you as a parent can help.

- *Help your teenager talk about the event.* Let her know that it's normal to feel worried or upset. Try to listen carefully and understand what she is saying.
- *When you talk about the event, be honest.* Don't diminish the nature of the tragedy.
- *Talk about what happened and share clear, accurate information.* Ask your teenager what he thinks has happened, and what other kids at school are saying. If he has any misconceptions, this is a chance for you to help him correct false fears and misinformation. If your teenager knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with him about his fears.
- *It might be a good idea to limit the amount of TV news coverage your teenager sees.* Too much repeated coverage could just heighten your teenager's anxiety.
- *Try to be patient if your teenager asks the same questions again and again.* Let your teenager talk as often as she needs to about the traumatic event. Talking about the event with you is a way for your teenager to gain control of feelings that follow a trauma.
- *Talk with your teenager about your own feelings.* Explain how the trauma or event is affecting you. Admit that you are saddened by what has happened, and show that you care. But don't burden your teenager with your fears and worries. Find other adults to talk to about those.
- *Encourage your teenager to talk with friends and other important people in his life about the event.*
- *Reassure your teenager that your family and community are safe and that events like these are rare.*

Ways to support your teenager through a trauma

- *Remember that this may be the first time your child is experiencing grief.* Expect her to have many feelings — anger, sorrow, fear, confusion, and sometimes, guilt if others have died. Assure your child that all of these feelings are normal.

- *If there had been a previous loss this may bring up old pain.* Take the time to reflect with your teenager on how he has recovered from prior losses.
- *Your teenager may feel afraid and upset following the traumatic event and may no longer feel “normal.”* She may show her fears in ways that she did when she was younger — by having night terrors, crying, being clingy, or being overly fearful. These behaviors are normal. Try to be loving and understanding. Coping with a traumatic event takes time. Your teenager needs extra love and support from you during this period.
- *Don’t assume that just because your teenager hasn’t said something about the trauma that he is OK and isn’t affected by it.* Sometimes, teenagers are confused by a traumatic event, want to avoid it, not talk about it, or are afraid to show their vulnerability. You may need to take the first step and bring up the subject when you and your teenager have time together.
- *Help your teenager find comforting routines as a way to cope* — listening to favorite music, doing art work, playing basketball, or other activities. This is a time to keep routines simple at home.
- *You might suggest that your teenager keep a journal to record her moods, thoughts, feelings, and worries.* This can be helpful in coping with powerful emotions, disturbing thoughts, and feelings of grief.
- *Encourage your teenager to become involved as a way to overcome feelings of helplessness.* Powerlessness is painful for adults and children. Being active in a campaign to prevent an event like this one from happening again, writing letters to people who have helped or to victims, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family. Your child may even want to contribute money to the victims’ families.
- *Encourage your child to stay connected with others and not to be isolated.* Encourage him to see friends and to continue with normal activities. Many adolescents are wonderful about rallying together to help each other in times of need. Encourage your teenager to reach out to friends.
- *Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance.* Your teenager’s attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for a few days or weeks.
- *Encourage your teenager to talk with other adults about the event.* This might be a teacher, school counselor, member of the clergy, or someone else from the community that your teenager feels close to and trusts.
- *Most important of all, try to be there for your teenager.* Give extra attention and support. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.

Staying strong as a parent

Keep in mind that your own behavior is a powerful example for your teenager. How your teenager copes with a traumatic event will depend to some measure on how you as a parent cope. Your child is looking to all the adults around him — parents, teachers, relatives, clergy and others — to find

positive ways to deal with the event. It's important for you to stay strong as a parent so you can support your child.

- *Get enough sleep, eat well-balanced meals, and try to stick to regular routines.*
- *Seek support from others.* Because you are also responding to trauma, it is very important to talk to other parents, friends, counselors, and other adults. Share your anxieties and frustrations with them. And don't be afraid to ask for help.
- *Give yourself time to reflect on what happened.*

If fear continues

Usually, a child's reactions to a traumatic event do not last long. But sometimes fears can last, and can interfere with enjoyment of everyday life. Warning signs that this might be the case include:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- changes in behavior (unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness)
- angry outbursts, acting-out behavior
- excessive clinging
- excessive crying
- headaches or stomach aches
- alcohol or drug abuse
- change in appetite (increased or decreased)
- loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- drop in grades
- isolation, spending more time than usual alone

If your teenager is experiencing any of these signs, seek expert help.