

# Helping Your Teenager Cope After a Traumatic Event

## Overview

Ways to help your teenager cope with such tragedies as school shootings, acts of violence, and terrorism, which have an impact on children of all ages.

- Ways to talk with your teenager after a traumatic event
- Ways to support your teenager through a trauma
- Staying strong as a parent
- If fear continues

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 can take to support your teenager after a traumatic event.

## 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 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 how you feel, too.
- *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 information. 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 keep your teenager in a continuous state of heightened 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 unburden herself, figure out what's really bothering her, and gain control of her feelings.
- *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 what's bothering you.
- *Encourage your teenager to talk with friends and other important people in his life about the event.* Teenagers can find it very comforting to talk with their peers.

- *Reassure your teenager that your family and community are safe and that events like these are rare.* Help your teenager accurately assess the likelihood that such an event would reoccur.

### **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 has been a previous loss, this may bring up old pain.* Take the time to reflect with your teenager on how he has dealt with and 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, patient, and understanding. Coping with a traumatic event takes time. Your teenager needs extra love and support from you during this recovery 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 talking 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 alone together.
- *Help your teenager find comforting routines as a way to cope.* Encourage your teenager to listen to favorite music, do artwork, play basketball, or participate in other normal activities. This is a time to keep routines simple at home, and even to encourage new ones.
- *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. It can also be a concrete way for her to track her recovery process.
- *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, purpose, and control to everyone in the family. Your teenager may even want to contribute money to the victims’ families.
- *Encourage your teenager to stay connected with others instead of isolating himself.* 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.

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- *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.
- *Try to be there for your teenager.* It is very important to give your teenager extra attention, patience, and support. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.
- *Ask your teenager what she needs.* Make suggestions as well. Teenagers may be more willing to tell you how they're feeling or ask for help if you involve them in the process.

#### **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 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 so that 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 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.* Stop long enough to know what you're thinking, what you're feeling, and how well you're coping. Get objective professional help for yourself and to help you support your teenager.

#### **If fear continues**

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

- 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

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- headaches or stomachaches
- 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
- needing to be around people all the time

If your teenager is experiencing any of these signs for a prolonged period or if you think your teenager is at any risk, seek expert help immediately. Contact your employee resource or employee assistance program for assistance finding resources or information to help your teenager.

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