

Tips for Supporting Children and Youth after a Crisis Event

Tragic incidents, such as mass shootings can alter a person's sense of security. We know that children may be upset or have questions about what has taken place. Professional mental health staff have created some tips to help you and your child to respond and feel safe. We encourage you to review these tips and use them as you see fit.

Be reassuring. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Your reactions are most important. Recognize that some children may be concerned about something bad happening to themselves, family or friends. Explain to them the safety measures in place and reassure them that you and other adults will take care of them.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you to learn how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. However, be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions.

Monitor the news. Images of a disaster or crisis event can become overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Young children in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of how they coped in daily life during difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other crises from which people, communities, or countries have recovered.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the country and world. Focus on the help and hopeful thoughts being offered to those affected by other people.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Allowing children to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Routine family activities, classes, after-school activities, and friends can help children feel more secure and better able to function.

Spend family time. Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to participate in and to appreciate family life. Doing things together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness.

Ask for help if you or your children need it. Any tragedy can feel overwhelming for families directly affected, particularly those who have lost loved ones. Staying connected to your community can be extremely helpful. It may also be important to seek additional support from a mental health professional to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Communicate with your school. Children directly impacted by the disaster may be under a great deal of stress that can be very disruptive to learning. Together, parents and teachers can determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with parents to develop a plan to help student. Your school social worker, psychologist or counselor can also provide extra support.

Be aware of your own needs. Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, priest, and mental health counselors can help. It is important to let your children know that you are sad. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.