

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Traumatic events “happen.” They may be large events that impact the whole country or the whole civilized world; or they may be events that affect an individual, a family, a neighborhood, or a community. Regardless of their scope, these events can have a powerful impact on anyone caught in their repercussions. As an analogy, one can experience the same effect standing next to a small explosion as they would standing further away from a large one.

As we all try to deal with and comprehend the uncertainties of current events, we must also keep in mind the impact they are having on our children and help them learn to deal with it as well. Young people often do not have enough life experience to keep things in perspective and, because of this, fear can become overwhelming. The following are some common reactions you may see in children who are experiencing trauma. Reactions will vary with the age and developmental stage of the child or adolescent. Generally, older youth will have a need to talk about it and to be reminded of the skills they have to deal with trauma. Younger children will need more reassurance that things are okay and to know who they should go to for help.

The following are some developmental reactions and responses compiled by the Prevention and Community Response Unit of the Washtenaw County Public Health Department that parents and other adults can use to help their children come to terms with their feelings and emotions during this difficult time.

Common Reactions & Appropriate Responses from Adults

Age: 2 to 6

Reaction

- Generalized fear
- Cognitive confusion, e.g. do not understand that the danger is over
- Helplessness, passivity, e.g. may become mute, withdrawn, and still
- Anxious attachment to caregiver, e.g. clinging, not want to be away from caregiver, may not want to sleep alone
- Sleep disturbances, e.g. night terrors
- Regressive reactions, e.g. toileting, dressing, speech
- May engage in reenactments and play about the event, sometimes with magical qualities/character of the event
- Incomplete understanding of death, e.g. permanency of death, association with sleep, a desire to “fix up” the deceased
- Difficulty identifying and expressing what is wrong, e.g. periodic sadness

Response

- Need rapid reassurance that they will be OK and taken care of
- Reestablish familiar adult protection
- Give repeated concrete clarifications of what has happened and anticipate their concerns
- Provide support, rest, comfort, food and opportunities to play
- Provide consistent care taking, e.g. assurance of being picked up at school, keeping a regular meal schedule, bedtime and when caregivers will be home
- Be as tolerant as possible with regressive behavior; it is temporary
- Try to remove the association of what happened with specific triggers/reminders, e.g. playgrounds, cars
- Explain of the reality of death in age appropriate terms, when the child is open; e.g. a private moment or while reading

Age: 6 - 10

Reaction

- Impaired concentration and learning affecting performance at school
- Radical change in behavior, e.g. quiet child becomes active, active child, lethargic
- Somatic complaints such as headaches
- Retelling the event with great detail and “savior” endings
- Preoccupation with their behavior during or leading up to the event with feelings of guilt and responsibility
- Specific fears triggered by reminders or while alone
- Fear of being overwhelmed by their own feelings
- May have increasing difficulty controlling their own behavior and feel frightened by this lack of control

Response

- Allow enough “free” supervised time for play or expression through art, music or dance
- Encourage your child to let you or the teacher know that they may be having a hard time concentrating while at school. Explain that this might happen and is normal.
- Try to be patient with any behavior changes
- Reassure the child that they will be safe and there are people around to help
- Help your child associate emotional and physical sensations they may have had during the event and suggest ways of helping them feel better, e.g. changing the subject, doing something else
- As with play, allow time to talk, acknowledge the normalcy of their reactions, what secret images they may have and what specific reminders they may have
- The supportive presence of adults will help the child not be so overwhelmed and help remind them that feelings lead to actions they may not like or they cannot control. Help them establish a sense of control by allowing them to do something pro-active such as organizing a collection drive, making cards to send those in need, or making red white and blue ribbons for their friends and classmates to wear.

Age: 10 - 14

Reaction

- Become more childlike in attitude
- Be very angry at the unfairness of the event
- Manifest euphoria and excitement at survival
- “See” symbolic meaning to things that led up to the event and assign symbolic reasons for survival
- Suppress thoughts and feelings to avoid confronting the event
- Be self-judgmental about their own behavior
- Have a sense of meaninglessness of existence
- Manifest psychosomatic illnesses

Response

- Try to respond to the emotions that are underlying the behavior and reinforce more mature behavior by including them in the resolution of problems
- Encourage talking about the event in private moments. Discussions in front of others can lead to emotional reactions.
- Encourage supervised/supportive discussions about the event with peers if peers have been part of the event. Peers can inflame the reaction if not given some support and guidance.
- Provide realistic assessments of personal responsibility and “what could have been done”
- Help keep things in perspective, e.g. “These feelings will not last forever.” “You can shape your own future.”
- Help them establish a sense of control by allowing them to do something pro-active such as organizing a collection drive, making cards to send those in need, or making red white and blue ribbons for their friends and classmates to wear

Age: Adolescent to Adult

Reaction

- Feel anger, shame, betrayal and act out these feelings in school or the community
- May want to move into the adult world to get away from traumatic events and establish a sense of control over their world
- Very judgmental about their behavior and that of others
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- May have an enhanced sense of immortality or an increased sense of hopelessness
- Depression
- Alcohol and drug use may become a problem
- May engage in high-risk behavior
- May have a fear of being labeled abnormal

Response

- Acting out may be a way of “pushing the event away. Help them understand that might be what is going on.
- Encourage postponing major decisions in order to allow time for emotions to settle down and to grieve if necessary
- Speak to emotions that are underlying the behavior. “This must be a very frustrating, angry time.”
- Help them understand the adult nature of what they are feeling, encourage peer understanding and support
- Help them to not overreact to the impact this may have on their lives, help them grow from it, not lost in it
- Acknowledge the “depressed” feeling that may come and that is survivable and normal
- Acknowledge the anger they may be feeling, and explain how it can contribute to their sense of being “out of control” and “wanting to do something”
- Encourage them to do something pro-active such as donating blood if old enough or volunteering to help at the Red Cross or other organizations

For all ages:

- Give reassurance and hugs
- Assure them they and their families are safe (if this is the case)
- Limit their exposure to graphic details
- Let them talk and reassure them
- Solicit their ideas and feelings

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