

## Ways to Help Children and Youth Following a Tragedy or Crisis

Tragic events touch us all but often in different ways. For those who identify with or have a personal connection to the event or victims, have had previous experiences or who have mental health vulnerabilities, a tragic event carries the risk of an additional emotional burden.

These suggestions are provided to support the mental health and well-being of all children and youth, and the adults that surround them following a tragedy or crisis event. Discussion, information and action to the event is balanced with age appropriate information, supportive relationships and well-being strategies.

### Limit media exposure and talk of the events

Limit television viewing and other media exposure of the events. Inappropriate, graphic, detailed and excessive information can be overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Continuous exposure to conversation, information and images about the events is not recommended. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective. Be aware of the amount, and nature of conversations that you have with each other in front of children, even teenagers.

### Maintain routines

Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote health and well-being. Ensure that children and youth get plenty of sleep (perhaps even more sleep during the upset), they eat regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

### Reassure children about the ways that they are safe

Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help them put their feelings into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

### Make time to talk

Let children and youth's questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient. Children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around you, or offering to help. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings. Choose what information is to be shared based on the child's age and an assessment of your child's need to know.

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## Keep your explanations and discussions age appropriate

**Elementary aged children** need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that these events are very rare, and that adults are here to protect them.

**Middle aged children** may be more vocal in asking questions about the tragic event. They may need assistance separating facts from misinformation.

**Secondary aged students** may have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They may want to share concrete suggestions about how to prevent further tragedies.

## Observe children's emotional state

Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns may indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. If anxiety or discomfort continues beyond four to six weeks, it is important to seek professional support. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental health issue, may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

## Try not to dwell on the worst possibilities

Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the possibility of something happening and the probability that it will happen.

## Monitor and take care of your own well-being

Children learn from us. They are watching how we are handling ourselves in response to the crisis, and their sense of safety and well-being is impacted by how we are doing.

## 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 have 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 by others to those who have been affected by the crisis.

If you have questions, or would like to share information or concerns about your child(ren), please reach out to the principal, your family doctor or counselling agency.