

Dealing With Tragedy

Guidelines for parents, teachers and caring adults

When a disaster strikes that is entirely beyond our expectations, we are shocked and often have no idea how best to support our youth. As parents or loving adults in their lives, we want to help them cope with their fears and with any psychological trauma they may suffer and we often don't know where to start. While we want them to continue to feel like the world is a safe place, we also need to figure out what they now need in order to feel safe. These conversations are rarely necessary, and we want to know that our conversations are healing and helpful for them.

When youth are faced with a terrifying event, they feel a need to have more contact with primary family. This will be particularly true of those who knew those who died or were injured or were present during the unfolding of the event. This will be true for others as well. Because the developmental task of adolescence is about growing independent, older youth often feel conflicted about asking to sleep close to parents or wanting to stay home instead of going out with peers. It is important to allow them the closeness they need for the first several days. If it continues, it can help to have a conversation with the school counselor or another professional who can help with some ideas for regaining their sense of security.

Seeing images and repetitive coverage in the news is not helpful for anyone, especially youth. It is better to get information without any graphic images. Limit or eliminate entirely television news.

Both verbal and non-verbal messages (turning away from a conversation, changing the subject) can indicate to youth that we either aren't willing to talk about it or that we're afraid to talk about it. Be aware of your reactions to youth!

These suggestions might help you start meaningful conversations with your child about the event. Use those that seem most helpful, possibly over several days.

- No one could have dreamed that could happen. *When something like this happens, parents (or "caring adults") want so much to help you, but we're unsure what will help. What troubles you most right now?*

TRAUMA GUIDELINES

- *What do you think is most troublesome or fearful for your friends? What could adults do right now that would help you all feel safe?*
- *What has this changed for you or other students?*
- *How will I know when you're feeling the need to talk about this and I'm not asking? How can I make it easiest for you to let me know you want to talk or are bothered about something?*
- *What do you think would be helpful later?*

Some children talk more easily when we ask them to tell us what worries their friends or peers. Being less direct can be helpful. You'll still get the child's perception.

When they begin to speak, it's important to just listen to what they say might be their worries. Don't try to solve problems too soon or offer advice or comfort right away or you'll stop the process. Don't give advice or even try to allay their fears just yet. This is when we must listen! "Really. Tell me more about that." "How many kids do you think are worried about that aspect?" "What else are you thinking?"

Remember, you don't have to have answers. It is OK to say, "I don't know about that, but let's keep thinking together on this." "Can you think of anything we could do about this?" Listen to their fears. You can nod and say, "I can understand why that might be worrisome for kids." Encourage them to get all their fears named. You can't help with ideas for coping if you don't know what their fears are.

Reinforce the concept of mutual support and a caring community being important. "Who are all the people in your life who are helpful? Who are caring? Who you can turn to when you're feeling uncertain? We get through things together."

"Let's look at how very, very unusual this is." At this point you might use analogies about how rare someone does something like this, for instance, picturing a quart jar filled with black sand and in it there is one grain of salt. This is like picturing all the people in the community, and just this one person who was deranged.

"Who Wrap up with, "What would help you feel safe now? At home? What about when school starts? What will you want your principal and teachers to know? What else?" And finally, "I am so glad you would talk with me about this?"

