

Ways to Help Children and Youth Following a Tragedy or Crisis



Tragic events can touch us all but often in different ways. For those who identify with or have a personal connection to the event or the victims, have had previous experiences with trauma, crisis and loss or who have mental health vulnerabilities, a tragic event carries the risk of prompting or intensifying existing distressing feelings or 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.

Reassure children about the ways that they are safe

Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Your own reactions are important to children in your care. 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.

Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally and may express their feelings in how they interact socially or behaviorally. Some children and youth may be concerned about something bad happening to them, their family or friends. Reassure them that you are here to take care of them and provide concrete examples of what you do to keep them safe.

Maintain routines

Keeping to a regular schedule, whenever possible, can be reassuring and promote health and well-being. Ensure children and youth get plenty of sleep (perhaps even more sleep), they eat healthy meals and are physically active. Encourage them to participate in family activities, learning, do things they enjoy and to connect with friends but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Limit media exposure and talk of the events

Limit television and other media exposure of the events (including social media). Graphic, detailed and excessive information can be overwhelming, especially if watched repeatedly. Continuous exposure to conversations, information and images about the events is not recommended. Be aware of the amount and focus on conversations that you have with each other in front of children, even adolescents. Older children may choose to watch the news or other coverage through social media, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.

Make time to talk

Let children and youth guide you as to how much information they need you to provide. Be patient. If they are not focused on the stressful event, do not dwell on it. Children and Youth do not always talk about their feelings. Watch for social or behavioural cues 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 a way to express themselves. Young children may need concrete activities (drawing, reading books or imaginative play) to help them to identify and express feelings. Be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability based on their age and assessment of your child's need to know.

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Keep your explanations and discussions age and developmentally 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 keep them safe. Young children may not be able to distinguish between images on television or social media and their personal reality.

Middle Aged Children

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

Secondary Aged Children

may have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence. They may want to share concrete examples about how to prevent further tragedies.

Observe children's emotional state

Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite, and sleep patterns may indicate a change in your child's level of anxiety or distress. In most children, these symptoms will ease with time and reassurance. If anxiety or distress 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 or youth who have experienced or perceived they've experienced violence, traumatic circumstances or personal loss, have a pre-existing mental health issue, may be at greater risk for more severe reactions than others. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

If you have questions or would like to share information or concerns about your child(ren) or youth(s), please reach out to the principal, your primary care practitioner or local child and youth counselling agency.

Emphasize people's resiliency

Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic or stressful 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 and communities have recovered.

Monitor and take care of your own well-being

Children learn from us. They are watching how we handle ourselves in response to the crisis and their sense of safety and well-being is impacted by how we are doing. 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. Don't ignore your own feelings. Talking to friends, supportive family members, faith leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is important to model for children how to express our feelings appropriately. Understand that if you have been directly impacted as a guardian, parent or staff, just getting through the day can be overwhelming. Treat yourself as you would a friend, be compassionate and non-judgmental, and you are doing your best.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity.

Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the country and the world. Focus on the help and hopeful thoughts being offered by others to those who have been affected by the crisis.

Focus on family interactions

Being with family is important in difficult times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to participate in and express gratitude quality, fun family interactions. Doing things that your family enjoys together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness