

Coping Strategies for Youth Following a Traumatic Event

A handout for middle and high school students and parents

Traumatic reactions are common for those witnessing or surviving events outside our usual reality. These are different from grief. With grief, a person struggles with feelings of personal loss. With trauma, you don't need to know those involved in the crisis to have a strong reaction. While strong emotions may accompany a traumatic event, they are primarily in response to thoughts and memories. Trauma is psychological or brain-centered. Grief is more emotional or heart-centered.

Witnessing a traumatic death, giving aid to a victim, being at the scene of a fire... all of these experience might result in a traumatic reaction. Your brain decides to lock in the memory of the event because it is too much to deal with all at once. In the following days, your brain may bring up memories and thoughts of the event over and over again, to try to deal with it. But when these memories come up, your body gets anxious and you can feel like the event is actually happening.

Part of what drives the traumatic response for us is the biochemistry in our bodies. When our lives are in the balance, our bodies mobilize adrenaline and other chemicals that allow us to fight for our lives or flee. One of the reasons we have such a difficult time relaxing after a traumatic event is that with each vivid memory of it, our bodies think we could be in danger again and mobilize responsive biochemistry. The reaction to those chemicals is feeling anxious, on edge, and easily provoked.

Symptoms of Traumatic Reactions

- Feeling detachment or guilt. Remember, you didn't make the event happen.
- Feeling self-conscious about fears or other emotional responses.
- Self-identity changes, for the better or worse. Talk with a trusted person.
- As the initial shock wears off, many experience a roller coaster—feeling nothing and then a cascade of feelings. Talking about fears and frustration will help feelings to level out as we integrate this event into life's greater context.
- While emotions are erratic, it can be difficult to concentrate. This will subside.
- Frightening dreams or flashbacks may occur. If this begins to cause sleep trouble or major appetite change, talk with a trusted adult and/or get professional care.
- Fears of a similar fate happening again are not uncommon. Many people have anxiety about what's going to happen next?" Keep talking to good listeners.
- Stomachaches, headaches, heart palpitations, and shortness of breath are physical symptoms related to emotional struggles. Don't fear strong emotions; pay attention and cope in healthy ways: talk, exercise, listen to music, write, etc.

Other Information and Strategies for Traumatic Experiences

- Because feelings may surface over the next weeks or months, find someone safe to talk with and to vent. Choose someone non-judgmental and empathetic.
- Sometimes when feeling traumatized, we doubt our relationships. This is an important time to reaffirm relationships with family and friends. Remember the people who have had a positive impact on your life and let them know what they've done to be helpful to you.
- Restore a sense of safety and community. Invest in activities and school spirit; make this a time for pulling together in a positive way.
- When traumatized, some wish we were younger or older (when things seemed safer and our parents seemed able to protect us or thinking that if we were older, we could handle things better). This is a common response to trauma.
- People react to traumatic events differently depending on proximity to the event, length of time in the event, how well we know those involved, and our previous experiences. Some people feel more impact; some people feel less.
- If someone you know died in the event, your reaction may be a combination of trauma and grief. Often, we need to work on the trauma first and then weave that coping with grief. People are often fearful of the overwhelming impact of grief. Although grief feels dangerous, it is just very uncomfortable. A sense of unrealness as well as disbelief, anger, and sadness are common.
- Having clear information will help to put the event into perspective. However, media coverage of the event or legal proceedings may trigger recurring feelings. This is not unusual. It will be helpful to talk it out again...and again. Too much media exposure about the event can do harm, so limit time on event coverage.
- Tragedies often make us feel like life has changed forever. If we work at dealing with our feelings and putting words to the memories, this event will become another chapter in your life and will not hold the same power it has now.
- Avoid unhealthy responses to trauma. Drugs and alcohol can be an attempt to medicate away our pains and fear but usually do more harm. Self-destructive behavior will hurt your self and others. A desire to take revenge is not unusual but revenge actions do not change what happened and result in consequences for you and pain for those who care about you.
- Sometimes a situation (emergency siren) or random thought can trigger feelings like we're back in the crisis. If this happens, focus on something to remind you that today is different from the crisis day. Talk to yourself: repeat that you are not in danger—it just feels that way. Some wear a new piece of jewelry or good luck charm to help us remember that this is a new day.