

Helping Your Teenager Cope After a Traumatic Event: Ways to support your teenager through a trauma

When a tragedy occurs in our midst — a violent incident at school, a bombing, or another act of terrorism — our first thoughts are for our children. How do we help them cope? How do we give them the support they need? There are several steps you can take to support your teenager after a traumatic event.

This is the first in a two-part series of articles on helping your teenager cope after a traumatic event. Read the previous article, "[Ways to talk to your teenager after a traumatic event.](#)"

Ways to support your teenager through a trauma

Remember that this may be the first time your child is experiencing grief. Expect them to have many feelings — anger, sorrow, fear, confusion, and sometimes guilt if others have died. Assure your child that all of these feelings are normal.

If there has been a previous loss, this may bring up old pain. Take the time to reflect with your teenager on how they have dealt with and recovered from prior losses.

Your teenager may feel afraid and upset following the traumatic event and may no longer feel "normal." They may show their fears in ways that they did when they were younger - by having night terrors, crying, being clingy or being overly fearful. This behaviour is normal. Try to be loving, patient and understanding. Coping with a traumatic event takes time. Your teenager needs extra love and support from you during this recovery period.

Don't assume that just because your teenager hasn't said something about the trauma that they are OK and aren't affected by it. Teenagers are sometimes confused by a traumatic event. They may be afraid to show their vulnerability and prefer to avoid talking about the event. You may need to take the first step and bring up the subject when you and your teenager have time alone together.

Help your teenager find comforting routines as a way to cope. Encourage your teenager to listen to their favourite music, do artwork, play sport or participate in other normal activities. This is a time to keep routines simple at home, and even to encourage new ones.

You might suggest that your teenager keep a journal to record their moods, thoughts, feelings and worries. This can be helpful in coping with powerful emotions, disturbing thoughts and feelings of grief. It can also be a concrete way for them to track their recovery process.

Discuss how teens can help maintain safe schools and communities. Talk about the importance of following school safety guidelines for reporting strangers near to or on the school site and of notifying adults when a child is being bullied or harassed in the neighbourhood.

Encourage your teenager to resume normal routines instead of isolating themselves.

Encourage them to see friends, attend school and to continue with normal activities. Many adolescents are very good at rallying together to help each other in times of need.

Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance. Your teenager's attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for a few days or weeks.

Encourage your teenager to talk to other responsible adults about the event. This might be a teacher, head teacher, member of the clergy, or other trustworthy adult from your community.

Try to be there for your teenager. It is very important to give your teenager extra attention, patience and support. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.

Ask your teenager what they need. Make suggestions as well. Teenagers may be more willing to tell you how they're feeling or ask for help if you involve them in the process.

Staying strong as a parent

Keep in mind that your own behaviour is a powerful example for your teenager. How your teenager copes with a traumatic event will depend to some measure on how you cope. Your child is looking to all the adults around them — parents, teachers, relatives, clergy, and others — to find positive ways to deal with the event. It's important for you to stay strong so that you can support your child.

Get enough sleep, eat well-balanced meals and try to stick to regular routines.

Seek support from others. Because you are also responding to trauma, it is very important to talk to other parents, friends, and family members. Share your anxieties and frustrations with them. And don't be afraid to ask for help.

Give yourself time to reflect on what happened. Stop long enough to know what you're thinking, what you're feeling and how well you're coping. Get objective professional help for yourself and to help you support your teenager.

If fear continues

Usually, a teenager's reactions to a traumatic event do not last long. But sometimes reactions to trauma can last and interfere with enjoyment of everyday life, particularly if your teen has experienced a previous trauma or has other mental health problems, such as anxiety. Warning signs that this might be the case include the following:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- fear of going to school, going outside or being left alone
- changes in behaviour (unusual quietness, unresponsiveness or tiredness)

- angry outbursts, bad behaviour
- excessive clinging
- excessive crying
- headaches or stomach-aches
- alcohol or drug abuse
- change in appetite (increased or decreased)
- loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- drop in performance at school
- isolation, spending more time than usual alone
- needing to be around people all the time

If your teenager is experiencing any of these signs for a prolonged period or if you think your teenager is at any risk, immediately seek the help of your GP. Contact your assistance programme for help finding resources or information to help your teenager.

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