

Nuts and Bolts

Helping Your Teenager Cope After a Traumatic Event

Despite the seemingly complex issues a teenager presents under normal circumstances, it is important to realize that they will react to the trauma the same way you do. Its meaning to them may be different. Here's what to do:

1. ***Talk with your teenager.*** But let him or her do the talking! Be a good listener. Repeat back the feelings and reactions that are being experienced and remind him/her that they are normal reactions.
2. ***Be Honest.*** Let them get the facts from you. This info may be tested around peers as there will be rumors and distortions of truth.
3. ***Clarify misinformation and distortions.*** Have your teenager share his/her perception and knowledge of the event. Ask your teenager what he/she thinks has happened, and what other kids at school are saying. If there are any misconceptions, this is a chance to help correct false fears and misinformation. If your teenager is aware of upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with him/her about the fears.
4. ***Assess the teenager's desire for more information.*** While a young adult may be seeking facts for assurance, over watching the TV can indicate a level of shock and disbelief. Too much repeated coverage could also just heighten a teenager's anxiety.
5. ***Do not discourage repetitive questions.*** Let the teenager talk as often as needed about the traumatic event. Talking about the event is a way for the teenager to gain control of feelings that follow a trauma. Displaying frustration will shut down and send the message that there is something wrong with them.
6. ***Share your experience.*** Explain how the trauma or event is affecting you. Admit that you are saddened by what has happened, and show that you care. This is providing education about normalcy.
7. ***Reassure the rarity of these events.***
8. ***A quiet teenager does not mean an OK teenager.*** Sometimes, teenagers are confused by a traumatic event, want to avoid it, not talk about it, or are afraid to show vulnerability. Take the first step and bring up the subject when there is time to spend together. Using a journal may help.
9. ***Help your teenager find comforting routines as a way to cope*** -- listening to favorite music, doing art work, playing basketball, or other activities. This is a time to keep routines simple at home.

10. ***Refocus children on what they have control over.*** Powerlessness is painful for adults and children. Volunteering, writing letters to people who have helped or to victims, and caring for others, can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family. Your children may even want to contribute money to the victims' families.
11. ***Encourage your children to stay connected with others and not to be isolated.*** Encourage them to see friends and to continue with normal activities. Many adolescents are wonderful about rallying together to help each other in times of need. Encourage your teenager to reach out to friends.
12. ***Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance.*** A teenager's attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for a few days or weeks.
13. ***Most important of all, try to be there for your teenager.*** Give extra attention and support. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.

Signs that your Teenager is Struggling

Usually, a child's reactions to a traumatic event do not last long. But sometimes fears can last, and can interfere with enjoyment of everyday life. Warning signs that this might be the case include:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- changes in behavior (unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness)
- angry outbursts, acting-out behavior
- 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 grades
- isolation, spending more time than usual alone

If your teenager is experiencing any of these signs, contact a mental health professional.