

## **ADOLESCENTS WHO WITNESS A TRAGEDY – WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.**

Adolescents who have witnessed violence in the home, school, or community are more vulnerable to serious long-term problems. The event may be something that was not preventable, such as a death of family member or a friend, a separation or divorce, or even an attack on someone close to the family. Sometimes the event might not be in your backyard, but it may have an impact on the entire community, country and world, such as a war. Emotional reactions, including fear, depression, withdrawal, or anger, can occur immediately or sometimes weeks or months after the tragic event. Parents and other caring adults need to support children and adolescents who have experienced a catastrophic event to avoid long-term emotional harm.

### **What Can Families Do?**

Families often feel helpless after a catastrophic event, however, families can become involved by:

- Spending more time together as a family
- Explaining what is known about the event and initiating conversation by asking questions
- Being available to talk about what has happened and their feelings
- Helping adolescents understand that most people will not hurt them and that most situations are safe
- Reassuring the adolescent that they are safe
- Returning to as normal a routine as possible

### **Actions to Take**

Following a catastrophic event, which may be near or far away, there may be endless local and national media exposure. According to Children Now Magazine (January 2005), almost 54% of adolescents report watching television news and news magazine programs almost daily or several times a week. 50% of adolescents report reading the newspaper daily or several times a week. Reports indicate children and adolescents watch television an average of 3-5 hours per day and 21-23 hours a week. Therefore, it is important for parents to:

- Monitor what they watching on television
- Explain that the events shown over and over again only happened on one day
- Avoid violent programming and watching prolonged news coverage about the event
- Turn off the TV and do something else, such as playing a board game or going outside to play, or something else that is fun.
- If your son/daughter is away from home, contact them and ask them how they are doing and what their reaction to what is happening is for them

### **Alternatives to Anger**

Once the initial shock and horror of the event has passed, it is important for adults to help children and adolescents find alternatives to expressing anger by:

- Helping children understand the emotions of anger and frustration of not knowing what to do

- Understanding that feelings of anger are a legitimate emotion
- Avoiding anger as an excuse to hurt others or be violent
- Avoiding discipline methods that are harsh or physically damaging

## ***HELPING CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH TRAUMA***

1. Listen to your teenager! Ask what they know about the event and find out what their perceptions are. Don't jump to conclusions. Parents should be prepared for their child to talk sporadically about the event, spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.
2. Reassure your teenager that their feelings are normal. Do not try to change their feelings or say they should not feel that way. Let them know that you will not judge, tease or make fun of them about what they tell you.
3. Allow your son/daughter to express feelings and share yours with them if and when appropriate. Address the irrationality and suddenness of the event or disaster. Children, adolescents and adults need their feelings validated.
4. Reassure children and adolescents that they are safe and loved and that people are doing everything possible to make this a safer world (give examples of police, firefighters, rescuers, nurses, doctors, etc. who may be on TV or in communities helping).
5. Be honest and provide accurate facts about the event. Older children and adolescents want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.
7. Issues of death should be addressed concretely and factually.
8. Don't transfer your own fears to your teenager. Respond to safety issues with calm and reassurance. Often parents' despair interferes with a child's ability to heal.
9. Help your adolescent return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
10. If possible and if needed spend extra time with your teenager doing something fun or relaxing and have a family time everyday.
11. Remember the importance of touching and hugs.
12. Parents should be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviors and accept signs of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the traumatic event.
13. Make sure all persons in your teenager's life are aware of the impact that the event had on the them.
14. Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
16. Connect the child, adolescent and family to support groups, resources, trauma specialists or other helpful community resources that can:
  - Provide information
  - Provide direction

17. Talk in hopeful terms about the future. This can help teenager rebuild trust and faith in his own future and the world.

## **Children and Adolescents**

Child and adolescent development can be significantly altered as a consequence of traumatic exposure. The onset of a wide range of symptoms and behaviors has been noted in children exposed to disasters and other traumas. As in adults, the greater the traumatic stressor, the more likely our children are to develop persistent psychiatric difficulties. Posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and separation anxiety disorder have been noted. The reactions of significant adults, e.g., parents and teachers, affect our adolescent's responses to trauma.

Children may develop avoidant behavior to specific reminders of the tragedy (e.g., avoiding areas of the playground where someone has been killed, doing something that reminds them of the tragedy). Other reactions commonly seen include fear of recurrence, grief reactions, guilt, and worries about the safety of others. Adolescents' responses more closely approximate adults. They may experience profound changes in their attitudes towards life and their future. Of special concern are increased risk-taking behaviors sometimes seen in adolescents following trauma.

It is important to prevent secondary complications stemming from disaster exposure. For example, chronic disturbed sleep may interfere with school performance. The child then can experience further blows such as school failure and its attendant damage to self-esteem.

Adolescents have a sixth sense that enables them to sense an adult's fear and anxiety. As adults struggle to deal with their responses and grief, they must remember that children and adolescents will turn to them for help, answers and guidance. Teenagers learn their responses to loss and how they will cope from their family. Parents and teachers can help children and young adults avoid or overcome emotional reactions that may result following a tragedy by creating an open environment, being there ready to listen and answer questions and providing support. How a parent or other adult react to a child following a loss, death or any traumatic event can aid (or hinder) in his/her recovery process.

Children and adolescents are at risk to experience fear and anxiety as reactions to tragic events. Following a disaster the adolescent's view of the world as a safe and predictable place is temporarily lost. They may fear that another event is likely to occur and that they or their family will be injured or killed. It helps to remind them that they are safe.

Research has shown that children, adolescents and adults alike who experience catastrophic events either in person or watching on television may demonstrate a wide range of reactions. Much depends of the type of event viewed. Many will experience fear and anxiety. Some may only worry or have bad memories of the event that will fade with emotional support and the passage of time. Others can be more deeply affected and experience long-term problems. The reactions common in adolescents—fear, depression, withdrawal, anger, acting out—can occur immediately following the event, or sometime after the tragedy.

Adolescents in particular are impacted by tragic events. Those who have started demonstrating some independence may shift and want to spend more time with their families. They may also be fatigued, have problems with sleep disturbances and show a lack of interest in favorite activities. It is important to be aware that adolescents may turn to illicit substances—drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with their intense emotions.