

## Trauma and teenagers - tips for parents

Teenagers who experience distressing events can be very concerned by the strong emotions they feel. Examples of such events include car accidents, bushfires, floods, sudden illness or traumatic death in the family, crime or violence.

Teenagers can also be deeply upset by local, national or international tragedies, or frightening events that affect their friends. Your teenager needs both your support and your adult perspective. The way in which you help them to handle the event will influence their behaviour in future crises.

### Talk about it

You can be sure that the event, particularly if it has been in the media, is a hot topic at school. It is important to allow your child to talk about their thoughts, feelings and fears with you. Suggestions include:

- It's natural to want to protect your child from harsh realities, but avoiding talking about the event will only increase your teenager's anxiety. Remember talking about tragedy will make them feel better, not worse.
- Remember feelings of distress, anger or grief are a natural part of healing and expressing them usually leads to feeling better.
- Tell them about distress and grief reactions. They need reassurance that what they're feeling is normal.
- Talk about the event as a family. Share thoughts and feelings.
- Don't expect or demand that your teenager will feel a certain way about the event. Respect their emotions and beliefs, even if you don't necessarily agree or understand them.
- If the event directly affected your family, your teenager may not talk to you for fear of upsetting you. Let them know that sharing thoughts and feelings together as a family is helpful to every family member, even if the conversations are painful.

### Help them gain perspective

A distressing or frightening event shakes a person's belief in the security and predictability of their world. Teenagers can feel particularly overwhelmed and anxious. Suggestions include:

- Help your teenager to find out as much as they can about what happened and why. Cause and effect is very important.
- While honest facts are essential, don't dwell on gruesome details or add anything unnecessary to their understanding.
- A teenager may feel the world is threatening and dangerous, particularly in the case of well-publicised human tragedies such as natural disasters or acts of terrorism. Help them to appreciate that for every terrible act, there are many more people in the world trying to make things right.
- It may help to limit their exposure to media.

### Be patient

Your teenager will experience strong and sometimes difficult emotions while they recover, such as moodiness and sensitivity. Suggestions include:

- Expect that your teenager will be emotional for a time and cut them some slack.
- Your teenager may become rebellious. This reflects their need to assert control over their lives. It may help if you sit down together and negotiate ways in which your child can safely 'lead their own life' while still obeying house rules.

- Your teenager may be angry with the family, the people they blame for the event or the world in general. Try not to get into arguments about it. Their feelings are part of their distress reaction.
- Your teenager may seem to not want your support. They may turn to friends instead, at least in the short term. Keep the lines of communication open. Let your teenager know you are always ready and available to talk.
- Your teenager may become clingy. Give them plenty of love and reassurance.

## Changes in their friendships

Trauma can change a teenager's relationships with their friends. Suggestions include:

- Explain to them that friends, teachers and other people in their lives who were not directly affected by the event will forget about it quickly.
- Tell them that their friends may not have the experience or emotional maturity to support them in the ways they might expect.
- Explain that friends may drop contact because they don't know what to say, not because they don't care.
- Your teenager may withdraw from their friends if they feel misunderstood. Don't push this. Explain that their experience has matured them and that it is normal to find activities with friends a little empty or meaningless for a time.
- Try to encourage your teenager to make time for fun and to continue to 'hang out' with friends just for the pleasure of it.

## School performance

It is not unusual for a teenager's school performance to suffer in the short term following a distressing event. Suggestions include:

- Make sure your teenager's principal and teachers understand what has happened.
- Ask teachers to let you know how your teenager is going and how they are managing schoolwork and other responsibilities. Keeping an eye on their progress outside the home will give you warning of problems that need attention.
- Make sure you tell your teenager about your conversations with teachers and your reasons. To go behind their back is to invade their privacy.

## Encourage them to take action

Teenagers can be deeply disturbed by local, national and international tragedies. Taking action is a powerful remedy for the helplessness they feel. Encourage your teenager to make a difference. Depending on the circumstance, the ways in which your teenager could help include:

- Donating blood
- Helping to raise funds for relief agencies
- Sending sympathy cards to affected people.

## Practical suggestions

Suggestions include:

- Maintain your regular household routine, whenever possible.
- Try to make sure your teenager eats well, gets enough sleep and keeps up regular exercise.
- Help them to deal with distress in healthy, positive ways. For example, exercise, relaxation exercises and meditation are helpful.
- Make time for fun family activities.
- Seek professional help if your teenager is persistently depressed or anxious, or if they seem to be struggling to cope in any way. A good place to start is your local doctor.

**If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.**

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

## Things to remember

- The way you help your teenager to handle a distressing or frightening event will influence their behaviour in future crises.
- Your teenager will experience strong and sometimes difficult emotions while they recover, such as moodiness and sensitivity.
- Seek professional help if your teenager is persistently depressed or anxious, or if they seem to be struggling to cope in any way.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

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