

## Guide to Helping Children & Teens after the Recent Shooting

The recent shooting has been an extremely frightening experience, and the days, weeks, and months following can be very stressful. Your children and family will recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and community. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to you and your family during and after this event. Over time, some youth and adults will return to normal routines, while others may struggle. Children and teens may react differently to the shooting depending on their age and prior experiences. Expect that youth may respond in different ways, and be supportive and understanding of different reactions, even when you are having your own reactions and difficulties. Children's and teen's reactions to the shooting are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers respond to the event. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common after mass violence. These generally diminish with time but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your children.

### Common Reactions:

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others
- Fears that another shooting may occur
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increase in activity level
  - Decrease in concentration and attention
  - Increase in irritability and anger
  - Sadness, grief, and/or withdrawal
  - Radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future
  - Increases or decreases in sleep and appetite
  - Engaging in harmful habits like drinking or using drugs, or self cutting
  - Lack of interest in usual activities, including how they spend time with friends
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school and work-related habits and behavior with peers and family
- Staying focused on the shooting (talking repeatedly about it)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the shooting (seeing friends who were also present during shooting, media images, smoke, police, memorials)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (loud noises, screaming)

### When to consider Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

When children develop long term symptoms (***longer than one month***) from trauma directly or witnessing it happening to someone else, and these symptoms are upsetting or interfering with their relationships and regular activities, they may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Examples of PTSD symptoms include:

- Reliving the event over and over in thought or in play
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Becoming very upset when something causes memories of the event
- Lack of positive emotions
- Intense ongoing fear or sadness
- Irritability and angry outbursts
- Constantly looking for possible threats, being easily startled
- Acting helpless, hopeless or withdrawn
- Denying that the event happened or feeling numb
- Avoiding places or people associated with the event

*Please note that children who have experienced traumatic stress may seem restless, fidgety, or have trouble paying attention and staying organized, and those symptoms of traumatic stress can be confused with symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).*

### Things I Can Do for Myself

- **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep and exercise.
- **Help each other.** Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or support each other.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.
- **Give yourself a break.** Take time to rest and do things that you like to do.

### Things I Can Do for Children/Teens

- **Make time to talk with your children.** Teens, especially, may say they are “fine” but sit down and talk with them anyway. Let them know that they are welcome to ask questions and express their concerns and feelings. You should remain open to answering new questions and providing helpful information and support. You might not know all the answers and it is OK to say that. *Answer questions honestly, but in appropriate doses and protecting them from unnecessary trauma.* For instance, when children ask what “execution style” shooting is, you might say, “It means intentional,” which is truthful, but not graphic or with unnecessary detail.
  - **How to get your kids to talk when they don't seem to want to?** Often it is because we ask questions that are quite direct, like “Are you worried about a school shooting happening in your school?” A way of asking those questions in a way that feels safer for kids to answer is to make the child the expert, and ask as if you're wanting advice or insight. “What kinds of things do you think kids are worried about? What do you think the kids at school want the principal to know?” This strategy **gives them a full “step” of distance** from the question, making it less personal. By doing this, children can talk about their fears without feeling so vulnerable, because they are thinking of it as though they're speaking for others. **And my favorite question for kids....** “What do you most wish adults understood about what it is like for you right now?”
  - **Help children feel safe.** Talk with children about their concerns over safety and discuss changes that are occurring in the community to promote safety. Encourage your child to voice their concerns to you or to teachers at school. Reassure children that, although this was terrifying, it is extremely unusual for people to be so mentally upset and out of control that they will do this sort of thing. Help them realize that, although this happened very close by, it is extremely unusual. Help them discern the difference in “everyday anger” that we all have and how this is different. Don't make promises you can't keep, however, so don't promise it won't happen. If your child is anxious about going back to school, allow him or her to call you during the day so you can **encourage them to stay at school because avoidance prolongs and encourages the fear.** Voice your faith that the school is doing many things to keep kids safe, especially now.
  - **Address withdrawal/shame/guilt feelings.** Explain that these feelings are common and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done. Reassure them that they did not cause any of the deaths and that it was not a punishment for anything that anyone did “wrong.” You can say, “Many children, and even adults, feel like you do. They are angry and blame themselves, thinking they could have done more. You're not at fault. There was nothing more you could have done.”
  - **Resist the impulse to always have an answer.** We often feel that we need to have an answer or to take away the pain... to give hope when there is fear. Sometimes this is our own discomfort in seeing children suffer. Voice your belief that we get through these things together, and that somehow, you'll cope and recover. That also means that **it is important for parents to allow their children to participate in the discussions that teachers will lead in the classroom.** This is actually very reassuring to children, because they see that others feel the same kinds of fears they feel, and also the teachers invite children to tell the school staff what will help them feel

safe. The children's concerns will be communicated to the principals, and this feels empowering for the students.

- **The fastest way to keep kids from talking more once they open up is to give advice or try to take away their pain!** Of course you want to take away the pain and fear. But the most empowering part of this is for kids to talk without interruption about how this is for them. Don't rush in with advice on why they don't have to worry. Ask questions like, "Can you help me understand more about that?" or "When you think about that, what is the next thing that comes to mind?"
- **Promote your children's self-care.** Help children by encouraging them to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest and exercise. Let them know it is OK to take a break from talking with others about the recent attacks or from participating in any of the memorial events.
  - **Self-soothing** varies from child to child, so try to help children come up with ideas about how they can help themselves feel better when they begin to worry. Children often think they're the only ones worrying about something. Help them create a list of all the things kids their age can do to help themselves feel better.
  - **Maintain routines & expectations.** Routines gives us a sense of security. Having something like this occur anywhere is terrible. Having it occur in one's own neighborhood is at least frightening and for some, terrifying. Children and youth may feel they've lost all sense of security. You can help your child by keeping the routines that give life structure and giving them warning when something will change. Some children may have coped very well in the past when a parent was late home from work, but now that sort of uncertainty may bring about fear or anxiety for the child.
  - **Address acting out behaviors.** Help children/teens understand that "acting out" behaviors are a dangerous way to express strong feelings over what happened. Examples of "acting out include intentionally cutting oneself, driving recklessly, engaging in unprotected sex, and abusing drugs or alcohol. You can say something like, "Many children and adults feel out of control and angry right now. They might even think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way - but it's not a good idea to act on it." Talk with children about other ways of coping with these feelings (distraction, exercise, writing in a journal, spending time with others).
  - **Limit media exposure.** Protect your child from too much media coverage about the attacks, including on the Internet, radio, television, or other technologies (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter). Explain to them that media coverage and social media technologies can trigger fears of the attacks happening again and also spread rumors. Let them know they can distract themselves with another activity or that they can talk to you about how they are feeling.
  - **Be patient.** Children may be more distracted and need added help with chores or homework once school is in session.
  - **Manage reminders.** Help children identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. When children experience a reminder, they can say to themselves, "I am upset because I am reminded of the shooting because the potato chip bag popped. But now there is no shooting and I am safe." Some reminders may be related to the loss of friends and/or family (photos of the person, music listened to together, locations of time spent together). Help your child cope with these loss reminders and provide them extra comfort during these times.
  - **Monitor changes in relationships.** Explain to children that strains on relationships are expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during this time. Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Encourage tolerance for how your family and friends may be recovering or feeling differently. Accept responsibility for your own feelings, by saying "I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I was having a bad day."
  - **Address radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future.** Explain to children that changes in people's attitudes are common and tend to be temporary after a tragedy like this. These



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feelings can include feeling scared, angry, and sometimes revengeful. Find other ways to make them feel more in control and talk about their feelings.

- **Entertainment and diversion are helpful.** It is really important to have breaks from the grieving, the worry, the event. Go out for pizza... go to non-violent, light and entertaining movies. Taking a break isn't disrespectful -- it allows us to recharge our energies. The bad news isn't going away. The breaks just give us time to regenerate so we can continue to cope. That means that parents need breaks, too.
- **Gratitude** and other positive feelings are important right now. Spend time with focus on gratitude, empathy, hope, relationships, and on the importance of tolerance and acceptance for others and friendships.
- **Seek professional help.** If teens have continued difficulties for more than one month after the event, parents should consult a trusted helper—a doctor or mental health professional.

***\*Please reach out for more support if needed\****

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