

COPING WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS TIPS FOR ADULTS



Trauma and grief are multifaceted concepts with complex origins and manifestations. The varying types and degrees of trauma-related effects require individualized strengths-based and adaptive processes and interventions on the part of service providers and professionals. Community and peer supports are pivotal in improving well-being and reducing isolation and other risk factors.

ADULTS

Common Feelings:

The sudden and violent nature of loss resulting from a mass tragedy is unique and can be a defining characteristic of grief and cause traumatic reactions for some. The emotional and physical wounds can take longer and be more complicated to heal.

- Loss of safety/fear
- Financial uncertainty
- Physiological impact
- Fear of being forgotten
- Stress/Anxiety
- Social isolation
- Disrupted family dynamics
- Psychological impact
- Profound grief

Increasing Preparedness:

Feeling unprepared can lead to a sense of helplessness, and internalizing stories of victims and survivors can lead to profound sadness or vicarious trauma/loss. A series of steps can be taken to help ease the shock if and when mass tragedies strike.

- Build a strong community and maintain social supports
- Connect to a nurturing community of support and build common bonds with others who can relate to the experience
- For parents, facilitate discussions about mass tragedies with children (see next page)

Indications for Need of Professional Help:

Anyone witnessing a traumatic event, even those not directly impacted and those absorbing media coverage of mass tragedies, can suffer from the emotional impact.

- Extreme fear or loss of safety
- Withdrawal or isolation from peers and usual social supports
- Severe reactions to trauma triggers or reminders
- Excessive or prolonged longing or yearning post-loss
- Indications of depression or anxiety

Coping in the Aftermath:

To counter fears, anxieties and isolation associated with trauma and grief, even vicarious trauma and sadness, it is important to establish personal safety both on an individual level and in group settings and to form community and peer connections.

- Identify and address triggers, reminders and feelings of loss or abandonment
- Self-care and attending to personal needs: maintain a healthy routine of exercise, sleep and relaxation
- Connection to a nurturing community, and if possible, connection with peers or others who have been through similar experiences

COPING WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS TIPS FOR CHILDREN



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Children

Helping Children Understand:

In helping children understand mass tragedies, adults should be mindful of the developmental stage of the child/children and their ability to process the finality of death and loss, as well as the complexities of traumatic experiences.

- Directly communicate what happened in a clear and concise way; it is best to avoid the use of metaphors or stories that might encourage fantasies, both positive or negative
- Give them the opportunity to ask questions and state how they are feeling
- Reinforce creative license to express their feelings through play, drawing, stories or other activities

Maintaining a Sense of Safety:

Children often internalize parental emotional reactions. It is important to establish that they are in a safe environment and that the child or their family members and friends are not in any immediate danger now or in the near future.

- Provide reassuring answers to any questions and concerns children have about the news or the traumatic event
- Inform children that mass-scale tragedies and traumatic events are rare and that people are working hard to determine why the event happened and to put protections in place to safeguard against this happening in the future
- Facilitate age appropriate discussions about parental emotional experiences to build comfort, safety and security; convey hope and show them how to build resilience in overcoming and learning from negative experiences

When a Child is Affected by Tragedy:

For children who have experienced a traumatic event first-hand, it is even more important to establish safety, build their resilience, and alleviate any fears that they may find themselves in a similar situation again.

- Be mindful of cues from children directly impacted by tragedies, such as acting out; these are indicators of how they need to express what happened
- Help prepare for what they should do if the event does happen again; give specific instructions that they can practice in order to gain confidence and reduce anxiety
- Establish connections to peer communities and individuals who understand their experience and can reduce stigma, build resilience and foster post-traumatic growth

Indications for Need of Professional Help:

Common reactions include extreme fear or loss of safety, withdrawal or isolation from peers and usual social supports, severe reactions to trauma reminders, excessive or prolonged longing or yearning post-loss, or indications of depression or anxiety.

- If traumatic reminders and trauma triggers are overwhelmingly present or linger in a disruptive way after the experience
- The presense of hypervigilance, reactivity and passivity
- Regression to earlier behaviors, such as bedwetting, temper tantrums or clingy behavior is normal, but may indicate need for additional support if they persist for more than a month