

Dealing With Tragedy

When a disaster strikes that is entirely out of one's frame of reference, such as an attack on a school, shopping mall or other public place, we are shocked and often have no idea how best to support our youth. As parents or loving adults in their lives, we want to help them cope with their fears and with any psychological trauma they may suffer and we often don't know where to start. While we want to allow them to continue to believe that the world is a safe place, we also need to figure out what they now need in order to feel safe. These are conversations that are rarely necessary, so it's hard to know how to engage them in a positive and healing way.

When youth are faced with a terrifying event, it is expected that they feel a need to have more contact with primary family. This will be particularly true of those who knew someone who was directly affected by the specific event, but will include others as well. Although the developmental task of this stage of life (adolescence/early adulthood) is about growing independent – leaning more away from family and toward peers -- we usually feel the need to reconnect with primary family after events that are so out of the ordinary. It is good to provide youth more closeness at this time.

There's a driving need for us to try to understand how this could have happened. Whenever our daily life and sense of safety is assaulted, we want to understand all we can in order that we can re-establish our sense of comfort in daily life. The primary sources of new information are television and the internet, and it is easy to keep them on all day just to get the most current information. This saturation of images and repetitive coverage is not helpful for anyone, especially youth. It is better to watch awhile for the new information, then to take breaks and go about some of your usual daily activities. People of all ages need breaks from the psychological saturation of information and images.

Just like adults, children are very able to read our nonverbal messages, our body language and our tendency to steer conversations away from those topics that are uncomfortable for us. When something is so out-of-the-ordinary, we don't really know what will be helpful, and because we don't want to make it worse, we often avoid talking about it. Or we make general statements we hope will reduce fears, which then shuts off our listening to their need. This often leaves youth making up stories to fill in the blanks of their understanding and of their fears.

Here are some suggestions on how parents might approach talking with children about this kind of event. Any of these suggestions might be asked or skipped, depending on your sense of what will be helpful. These are not questions that one needs to ask all at once, but perhaps over the hours and days that follow a human-caused tragedy.

- What just happened is beyond anything we ever dreamed could happen. When something like this happens, parents (or "caring adults") want so much to help you, but we're unsure what will help. What troubles you most right now?

Or, you might ask youth what they think is most troublesome or fearful for their friends or peers.

- What are things that adults could do right now that would help youth feel safe?

- What are the things that are different now in your life and the lives of youth?
- How will I know when you're feeling the need to talk about this and I'm not asking?
- What are the things that could be helpful later?

Sometimes adults might want to make it even easier for a child to talk about what concerns them, and we might think that the questions above are too direct. In that case, a statement that makes the child an expert – followed by a question - is often helpful: "Sometimes things that happen make youth worry. What kinds of things do you think kids/people your age are worried about?" Now they can assume that you think they're talking about others but not themselves. The younger the child, the more likely that the only frame of reference s/he has is his/her own fears, so even though they are framing it as someone else's worry, it may well be his/her own.

It is important that when they begin to speak, it's important to just listen to what they say might be their worries. Don't try to solve problems too soon or offer advice or comfort right away or you'll cut off the process. Don't give advice or even try to allay their fears just yet. Of course you will do this soon, but if we move into this too quickly, we don't hear all of their fears because we've cut off the process. This is when we must listen! "Really. Tell me more about that." "How many kids do you think are worried about that aspect?" "What else are you thinking?"

The Officials who are interviewed by media are usually very careful to state only what they know and to not use conjecture or opinion. This is very helpful in keeping down rumors, but it is easy for rumors to surface. Remember, you don't have to have answers right away.

It is OK to say, "I don't know about that, but let's keep thinking together on this."

"So what are some of the kinds of things that worry us most about this?" Listen to their fears. You can nod and say, "I can understand why that might be worrisome for kids." Encourage them to get all their fears named. Then begin to put those fears into context.

Often children may worry that if someone was crazed enough that he would engage in an act of extreme violence, how do they know it won't happen again with someone else? "When something like this happens, it is natural that we would think about whether this means that other people who are extremists will also now do something like this. Let's look, though, at how very, very unusual this is."

At this point you might use analogies about how rare someone does something like this, for instance, picturing a liter jar filled with black sand and in it there is one grain of salt. This is like picturing all the people in the community, and just this one person who was so deranged.

"What kinds of dreams might kids have that could be troubling?"

"What are things that other kids say that bother you most?"

"What do you wish adults understood about how this is for you?"

You might wrap up with, “What would help you feel safe now? At home? What about when school starts? What will you want your principal and teachers to know? What else?” And finally, “How will I know if this is bothering you later?” This is when you let them know that you want them to keep you posted on this... and it is always best if what you can do is check in with them in a few days. “I’ve been thinking about our conversation a few days ago and wonder what kinds of thoughts you’ve had since then.” Always let youth know that you appreciate their letting you know whatever it is they’ve shared. “I’m so glad you told me that. I just can’t guess what is on your mind, so I’m so glad you let me know!”