
Parents Handbook

Christ the King School

How to help your child during times of
grieving or death.

Ideas for conversation and understanding
your child's reaction

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What Families Need To Know

Following is a listing of what survivors of suicide or homicide need from you and what parents of traumatized children need to know.

Suicide Survivor Guidelines (Steele, 1986)

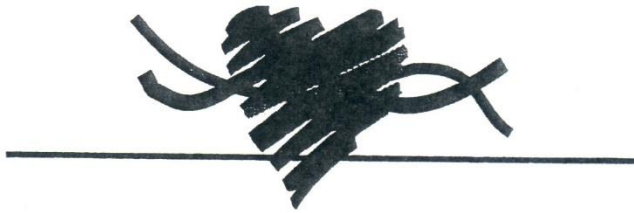
- Do not say "I understand" unless you are also a survivor.
- Let survivors know that you know this was not their choice, that they did not make this choice.
- Allow the survivor to feel and express anger at the deceased for the unwanted legacy they have left behind.
- Do not try to answer the question "why?" for it can never be answered completely.
- Encourage survivors to join a survivor support group. Call your local crisis center for information and pass this on to the survivors.
- Watch for clues that indicate survivors themselves may be suicidal.
- Inform survivors of the grief process. It may take up to two years, even longer, to learn to accept the death, forgive and begin moving forward.
- Also provide survivors information about the different reaction they are likely to have, i.e., flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, etc.
- Visit and check on survivors throughout the year as it is not unusual even for relatives and family members to withdraw from one another.
- Encourage them to talk about the deceased without being judgmental.
- Support their religious response at the time. Their faith may be shaken but will likely return in time. This is not the time to "push" religion if survivors respond with anger.





What Families Need To Know (cont'd)

- Encourage and help all family members to make joint decisions about services, the burial etc.
- Let survivors know that the deceased did not love them any less. Because of their despair and sense of hopelessness, the deceased likely felt his/her death would remove any burden he/she felt was causing survivors.
- If there are surviving children, reassure them that they are safe. If, as a surviving parent, grief prohibits responding to the child, let a relative help with the children. They need nurturing, affection, routine, favorite meals cooked, etc.
- If you're a parent, let children know that you may lose your temper or be less patient or unable to be the way the child needs you to be because of your grief. Your behavior is not because of them but because you are having difficulty.
- Return to basic routines. Keep life and tasks as simple as possible.
- Let children know what kinds of reactions they may have (like nightmares, etc.) and that these are normal responses. This helps to reduce their anxiety that something terrible is now happening to them.
- Always encourage survivors to talk. This is the key for both children and adults. The greater the silence, the greater the risk for serious problems emerging because of the traumatic aspect of the violent nature of suicide.



Normal Reactions Following Trauma Or Loss

Reactions to the death or trauma will vary according to how well the survivors knew the deceased; how close they were to the trauma; what they saw or experienced; their emotional stability and sensitivity; and what previous tragedies they may have experienced in their lives. Trauma/loss reactions will often be obvious within two weeks of the event. However, in some people, reactions may occur or reoccur months later.

Some of the common reactions are listed below:

- Questions WHY this had to happen.
- Sadness and missing the person.
- Need to talk about and remember the deceased.
- Anger and increased irritability.
- Guilt - a feeling of responsibility for action taken or not taken, or a feeling that "I survived when someone else didn't".
- Confusion; feelings are all mixed up.
- Shock, numbness, a belief that it didn't really happen.
- Feelings of loneliness or that no one understands. Social withdrawal.
- Fears (of the dark, of being alone, etc.).
- Loss of trust in people or in the world as a safe and fair place.
- Sense of helplessness and lack of control.
- Expectations that other bad things may happen, possibly one's own death.
- Difficulty concentrating and forgetfulness.
- Questions about the meaning of life.
- Concerns about the suffering of the deceased.
- Renewed memories of other losses or pain.
- Regression to more immature behaviors.
- Greater sensitivity and more emotional responses to everyday events.
- A drop in grades or job performance even months after the event.
- Memories of the deceased as being perfect.





Guidelines For Stress Management

Stress is the body's physical, mental and chemical reactions to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger, or irritate you. Stress is a very natural response to most kinds of emotional or physical trauma. There are a variety of ways in which one copes with stress. No one approach in coping with stress is the best approach. In fact, one needs to develop and depend upon numerous coping strategies.

The following list includes several suggestions for anxiety reduction and stress management:

- Talk with others about the traumatic event. You will feel as though your concerns or difficulties in adjusting are unique and the sharing will give you a common bond with one or more individuals who can be supportive.
- Build cooperative rather than competitive relationships. Look for ways that you can constructively help your co-workers or family members.
- Plan some time to be alone. This solitude will free you up to be responsible, at least for a short time, for nobody but yourself. The stress of others depending on you will temporarily be decreased.
- Allow yourself breaks from your usual work assignments. A 5-minute walk, a coffee break, or reading a magazine article will give you a refresher from their demands.
- Take time out for activities other than work. Often physical exercise, sports, or a social event is helpful in letting off pent-up energy or providing a pleasant diversion from something more tense.
- Recognize that decisions will be harder to make. Seek assistance if needed or defer decisions that can wait.
- Do not rely heavily on any one person. His/her stress level may increase to a point of not effectively meeting your needs. Choose people to depend on who will be understanding, patient, and hopefully, calm.
- If you are in a position of authority, attempt to either rotate the authority from time to time or consciously delegate some of your leadership tasks if you begin feeling the pressure of always "being in charge."
- You're normal and having normal reactions - don't label yourself crazy.
- Be aware of attempting to numb the pain with the overuse of drugs or alcohol. You don't need to complicate things.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal - don't try to fight them - they will decrease over time and become less painful.

GUIDELINES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT (Continued)

- Eat well balanced and regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Anticipate and plan to reward yourself when the stressful situation diminishes. Try to arrange for a day off, take a short trip, plan something out of the ordinary with friends or family, etc.
- Don't be reluctant to seek professional help. The stress, hopefully, will be a situational one for you; however, it might be useful to have some additional support or guidance.

Suggestions for Family Members and Friends

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family and minding children.
- Give them some private time. Be patient with them. Healing occurs at different rates for different people.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- Seek professional help as needed for yourself or others.



Traumatic Events Information

You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident (an overwhelming emotional experience). Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Sometimes, however, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage utilizing coping skills by themselves.

Here are some common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

Physical

fatigue
nausea
muscle tremors
twitches
chest pain*
difficulty breathing*
elevated blood pressure
rapid heart rate
thirst
headaches
visual difficulties
vomiting
grinding of teeth
weakness
dizziness
profuse sweating
chills
shock symptoms*
fainting
etc.....

Cognitive

blaming someone
confusion
poor attention
poor decisions
heightened or lowered alertness
poor concentration
memory problems
hyper vigilance
difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
poor problem solving
poor abstract thinking
loss of time, place or person orientation
disturbed thinking
nightmares
intrusive images
etc....

Emotional

anxiety
guilt
grief
denial
severe panic (rare)
emotional shock
fear
uncertainty
loss of emotional control
depression
inappropriate emotional response
apprehension
feeling overwhelmed
intense anger
irritability
agitation
etc....

Behavioral

change in speech patterns
withdrawal
emotional outburst
suspiciousness
change in interaction with others
loss or increase of appetite
alcohol consumption
inability to rest
antisocial acts
nonspecific bodily complaints
hyper alert to environment
startle reflex
intensified pacing
erratic movements
change in sexual functioning
etc.

* Could be a sign of more serious problems; seek professional help.

Parents: Ways to Help Your Traumatized Adolescent

(Steele, 1995)

- Do not be surprised by any significant changes in behavior or personality.
- Be more nurturing and comforting.
- Pay more attention, spend more time with them.
- Provide consistent care with younger children.
- Let them know where you are going, when you'll be back. If you are gone for several hours, call and let them know you're all right.
- Permit them to talk about the event if they want to.
- Encourage them to let you know when they are thinking about it or when new reactions occur.
- Normalize (explain) the reactions they have and are likely to have (See Trauma Reactions List) and, given their experience, how normal these reactions are.
- Provide labels especially for younger children, for the feelings they are having, i.e., sad, afraid, etc.
- Inform teachers so they do not misinterpret the child's behavior as something it is not.
- Be patient with difficulties in concentration, completing, school work or other tasks.
- Limit tasks. Keep them simple.
- Be patient with regressive behavior such as nail biting, thumb-sucking, etc.
- If their behaviors or changes in personality scare you, consult with a trauma specialist. Also reinforce that you understand that these are a result of their experience.
- Share their concerns for safety, but be realistic.
- Help them not to generalize.
- Remind them as needed that "that (incident) was then" and this is now and things have changed.
- Understand that new physical reactions such as headaches, fatigue, etc. are in response to overwhelming fears and their attempts to avoid them.
- Help them share their fears and worries.
- Help them understand the relationship between their anger and their trauma and find safe ways they can discharge their anger i.e. draw, write, talk about it, exercise, etc.



Parents: Ways to Help Your Traumatized Adolescent (cont'd)

- Help them hold onto positive memories of the victim especially during their most difficult days.
- Do not hurry their reactions along by saying, "It's time to get over it."
- Share your own trauma or frightening experiences. (You survived, they can too is the unspoken message when you share your experiences).
- Help them understand that their angry, defiant aggressive behavior, staying away from home, or taking unnecessary risks is a way to avoid feeling the pain, the hurt, the terror they experienced. Avoiding these feelings, however, will hurt them more.
- Help them talk about what they think could have been done differently.
- Emphasize, if they are feeling shame or guilt, that no one ever taught them to react in such a situation; they did not choose for it to happen and they are not responsible.
- If shame is tied to a physical reaction during the event such as wetting their pants, vomiting, crying, etc. assure them that unlike television portrayals, most people faced with terror will lose control over their bodies.
- If they are talking about revenge, ask about their plan and talk about realistic responses. Then provide additional ways to not let revenge take control of their life and to better help them with the pain. Ask for help with this.
- If children express that they are not afraid of anything anymore ("nothing scares me"), be more protective of them as they will not act safely in a potentially dangerous situation with others who put them at risk.

What Parents Need to Know About Traumatization

Parents need to know...

- That children can be traumatized in the same way as adults.
- That children experience reactions similar to traumatized adults.
- That post-traumatic stress creates reactions in addition to and different from grief.
- That children do not need to be the victim or the witness but only related to a friend or peer of a traumatized adult or child to be traumatized themselves.
- That violence is not the only kind of incident that can induce trauma in their child.
- That car accidents, house fires, serious surgical procedures, terminal illness of a loved one, drowning accident, finding a body, divorce, separation from a parent, plane crashes, floods, or hurricanes can all induce trauma in a child.
- That a family trauma such as the murder of a family member can traumatize the entire family.
- That each member of that family will have his/her own individual reactions.
- That similar reactions will be intense for some and not for others.
- That the longer trauma victims go without trauma-specific help, the more chronic and severe those reactions can become.
- That trauma reactions cannot be prevented, but their negative impact on the child's learning, behavior, personality and emotional development can be minimized when help is provided as soon as possible.
- That children, when given an opportunity, are eager and can face the details of their trauma.





What Parents Need to Know About Traumatization (cont'd)

- That traumatized children generally need to be seen periodically over a period of years, as reactions can take years to emerge.
- That trauma-specific help can aid the child in finding relief from their terror as well as regain a sense of control and power over the "monsters" that their experience induced.
- That children, when taken for trauma-specific help, will be forever grateful to the parent for acknowledging their need to talk with someone who understands what their terror is like.
- That not every psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, school counselor, or doctor knows what trauma is or how best to help.
- That there are questions to ask to determine how helpful a counselor, social worker, etc. might be to their child.
- That there are very specific ways they can respond to their child's specific reactions.
- That their traumatized child desperately needs their patience, provision of safety, security, and basic nurturing.
- That they themselves will also need support.



Homicide Survivor Guidelines

- Allow survivors to grieve in whatever way they wish and for a long as they wish.
- Inform survivors of all the possible reactions they may experience and that such reactions are normal.
- Allow survivors to cry freely. If is a healthy expression of grief and releases tension.
- Allow survivors to talk about the victim, his or her life, and the murder. Allow them to criticize the victim and to talk about the good times and the bad times.
- Allow survivors to get angry at you, the victim, the criminal, the criminal justice system, or simply at the unfairness of life. Anger needs expression and sharing.
- Remember the survivors and the victim at holiday time, the anniversary date of the murder, and birthdays. Let the survivors know you remember too.
- Allow the survivors some quiet time occasionally from day-to-day pressures. Offer the surviving parent help with the children so they can have a day off work, a day out of the house.
- Reassure the survivors that the murder was not their fault or the victim's fault.
- Support survivors in their effort to reconstruct a life, even (or especially) if it means a major change in their life-style, work, or place of residence.
- Let survivors know that you will remain their friend and that they mean a great deal to you.
- Accompany survivors to court as attending court tends to retraumatize survivors who will be in need of support at this time.
- Finally, survivors should be encouraged to seek additional support. Survivors of Homicide support groups are strongly recommended.



How to Help a Child With Loss

All Children Experience Loss!

Loss is a part of growing up.

Although loss always hurts, even a young child can learn that beautiful surprises come wrapped in the "package" of loss. We encourage you to talk about these gifts. Sensitive, caring adults are made, not born.

1. Talk about loss whenever the child asks questions
2. Answer honestly and only what's asked.
3. Don't use philosophical terms, use plain English.
4. Remember, until they are about nine years old, most children don't understand that death is permanent.
5. Tell the child he did not cause a death by his anger. (Children confuse the wish with the deed.)
6. Take the child to a cemetery or a funeral home to visit before death occurs.
7. Ask, "What do you wonder about?"
8. Talk about your own feelings of sadness when you have experienced loss. Don't shut the child out.
9. Don't wait for the one grand "tell it all" session.
10. If you are comfortable with death, your child will be also.

