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**Helping Children to Manage the Stress of a Traumatic Event**

We live in a time of horrific, senseless violence and catastrophic natural and accidental disasters. Acts of terrorism, shootings in our schools and communities, hurricanes, wildfires, and motor vehicle accidents seem to be in the news all the time.

While these events affect all rational, caring people, children are especially vulnerable to emotional distress when they are exposed to them. They do not even have to witness these events firsthand to be traumatized. The effects of trauma tend to be heightened by sudden, unpredictable crisis since there is little time to prepare or adapt to generated problems.

A supportive environment, stable adult figures, and early intervention can be helpful for grieving and traumatized children.

**Early intervention to mitigate psychological trauma**
Engaging children to cope with trauma involves perceptive listening to learn their needs. Recovery can be facilitated through honest reassurance of security, and social support systems (family, school, faith, community), self-expression, stress management strategies, and psychological first aid for those needing it.

**Parental guidelines to help teenagers cope with traumatic events:**

Adolescents may mask feelings of pain and grief with the misleading image of a ‘cool’ or strong façade. Hidden reactions can appear long after the traumatic event.

* Be a listener. Reflect genuine concern without giving advice. Encourage them to share their feelings and thoughts.
* Tell them that during difficult times - It is OK not to be OK.
* Be patient, be open, and be flexible.
* Maintain normal routines.
* Keep them informed with updated reliable information.
* Communicate that grieving may last longer than expected, although the intensity usually subsides over time. Encourage and allow healthy expression of grief.
* Do not avoid talking about a person or people who died or the event for fear it might reawaken the pain. Usually, teenagers want to talk, but in a manner and a time they select. Follow their lead.
* Times of grief are not times to make changes or important decisions. Try to keep the situation as normal as possible.
* Watch for trouble signs in adolescents. The need to appear competent may prevent teenagers from reaching out to others for help.
* While most grief reactions are normal and temporary responses to trauma, it is imperative that suicidal thinking be treated seriously, and that help is sought*.*
* Referral should be considered if trouble signs are especially severe and intense over an extended period, or if there are striking changes in usual behavior. Trouble signs include:
	+ Withdrawal and isolation
	+ Physical complaints (headache, stomach pain, insomnia)
	+ Emotional concerns (depression, sadness, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, confusion)
	+ Behavior problems
	+ School problems (avoidance, disruptive behavior, academic failure)
* The power of the peer group is often evident when dealing with teenage grief. Adolescents may form networks of support, leaning on each other during difficult times. Encourage helpful, cooperative, life-affirming activities.
* Stay tuned in. The healing process following a traumatic event takes time. There will be many ups and downs over the course of days and weeks. Be present, be alert, and be supportive as there is no set time frame for healing to occur.

A NOTE OF CAUTION!

Be careful not to pressure children to

talk about a trauma or join in expressive activities. While most

children will easily talk about what happened, some may

become frightened. Some may even get traumatized again by

talking about it or listen to others talk about the event.

Allow children to remove themselves

from these activities, and monitor them for signs of distress.

Reference:

American Psychiatric Association

American Academy Experts in Traumatic Stress

National Center Crisis Management