

How to Make Sense of Tragedies Happening in the World: How to Take Care of Yourself and Your Children in Difficult Times

Tragedies that occur around the world can affect all of us, whether you hear about them on the news or belong to a community that is directly impacted. Here are some tips on how to take care of yourself and navigate conversations about difficult events with your children.

Manage Your Own Reactions

It's okay, and expected, that adults are going to have our own reactions to these events. It's also okay to let children see our range of reactions. Your children will be watching you and taking their cues from you. It's okay to let children know you're worried or upset – but be sure to show them how you can stay calm and let them know what helps you feel safe. If you are experiencing strong reactions, try processing with another adult before sharing them with children.

Listen to What They Are Saying

Ask your children what they've heard about the situation. Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions in an age-appropriate manner. Sometimes it helps to have these conversations during an activity, such as drawing, mealtime, or driving with you in the car.

Spend time listening to understand what children already know.

Answer their questions and explain what's going on using simple words and concepts they can understand.

For Younger Children

Briefly acknowledging the events and providing reassurance may be what they need in the moment.

For Older Children

Kids may be seeing news on social media, so help them make sense of it by finding reliable sources of information together.

Focus on Safety

Help children of all ages to manage their worries by emphasizing that while it is important to know what is going on around the world, these frightening events are occurring far from home. Let them know you will always do your best to keep them safe. Offer reassurance that there are many people focused on ending the situation and helping people who are impacted.



Monitor and Consider Limiting Media Access

Limit media viewing and repeated exposure to distressing images, particularly for younger children. Monitor older children and adolescents' access to media and engage them in conversations with you about what they are seeing and hearing.

Maintain Routines

Sticking to a daily structure helps us all to feel safe and in control. Help children of all ages to maintain their daily routines, while knowing that some flexibility may be needed during this time to help children meet their needs.

Keep the Door Open

Encourage children to come to you with questions or concerns anytime. Let them know that their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them.

Practice Self-Care

Engaging in activities that bring us comfort and joy are especially important during challenging times. Consider ways to take care of yourself, and to support your children in practicing their own self-care. Engage in self-care strategies that help fill you up and recharge your battery. Some strategies include spending time with friends and loved ones, taking a walk, engaging in breathing or mindfulness exercises.

If it is meaningful to you, don't hesitate to seek out religious and spiritual support from your religious leaders and community members. Engaging in meaningful prayer can also be soothing in distressing times.

Watch for Behavior Changes

Children may show you through their behavior that they are struggling with what they have seen or heard. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors that include nightmares or sleep problems.

If you are concerned about your own or your child's reactions, seek out support from your physician or child's pediatrician, school, or a counselor.



Things to Think About and How to Care for Yourself During Times of Disaster/High Stress

Initial and later reactions to disaster/stressful events:

Many people have a range of reactions. A crisis can bring out strengths and the best in people. People come together to help one another, and you may see in yourself and others strengths that bring great pride.

Similarly, stressful situations may bring a range of other reactions, including:

- Fear
- Disbelief
- Disorientation and numbing
- Difficulty making decisions
- Need for information
- Seeking help for you and your family
- Helpfulness to others
- Change in appetite and digestive problems
- Difficulty in sleeping — sleeping too much or too little
- Headaches
- Anger and suspicion
- Apathy and depression
- Crying
- Frustration and feelings of loss of control
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Moodiness and irritability
- Anxiety about the future
- Disappointment with and rejection of outside help
- Isolating oneself from family, friends, or social activities
- Guilt over not being able to prevent the disaster
- Domestic violence
- Change in daily activities

Recognize your own feelings:

- Talk to others about your feelings and reactions. This will help relieve your stress and help you to realize that your feelings are shared by others.
- Accept help from others in the spirit in which it is given. Wouldn't you help them?
- Whenever possible, take time off and do something you enjoy
- Get enough rest
- Get as much physical activity as possible, such as running or walking
- Give someone a hug — touching is very important

Help for your community:

- Listen when you can to those who are having problems, and share your own feelings
- Be tolerant of the irritability and short tempers others show — everyone is stressed

*24 Hour Crisis Response Line: Call 888-851-2451
and ask to speak to a Trauma Center Manager*

Practicing Self-Care After Traumatic Events

Exposure to traumatic events can have a major impact on our emotions, behaviors, cognitive functioning, and physical well-being. People experience a range of reactions. It is common for them to report being more fearful, withdrawing from friends and family, feeling easily distracted or even frustrated by memory lapses, or failing to complete simple tasks.

The most common reaction people exposed to trauma or extreme stress report is the powerful impact on our bodies. Initially we may feel anxious, sense our hearts racing, or experience an adrenaline rush. After a few days, we may feel exhausted but have difficulty sleeping, notice that we startle easily, be more hypervigilant, or feel numb or detached. Often people report they cannot stop thinking about the traumatic event, watching it on television, or reading about it in the news.

The good news is humans are resilient and most everyone will recover in a short amount of time – usually a few weeks. To speed our recovery, we need to remember self-care is important and find ways to take care of ourselves on a daily basis. Here are a few things you can do to promote a return to normalcy:

- 1) **Maintain social connections:** When we experience a loss or a tragedy, it is easy to isolate or withdraw from our network of friends and family. But in a time of crisis, these support networks are more important than ever. Reach out to those who can support you. Make plans to see friends and stay connected in-person or on the phone. You may decide you want to temporarily avoid people who are not being supportive. And remember, that it is okay to take time out for yourself to rest and recharge.
- 2) **Engage in health-promoting behaviors:** Exercise several times a week and try and maintain a healthy diet. Our healthy routines and good eating habits disappear during emergencies, so we need to find ways to carve out time to go for a walk, swim, or whatever exercise you enjoy. Do not overdo it. If you are pressed for time, a short walk is fine. Do not be hard on yourself. Right now may not be the time to start a diet or quit smoking. Stay hydrated. When we are stressed we tend to use up more water than normal, and our bodies do not always give us the signals that we are thirsty, so it is important to drink a lot of water.
- 3) **Maintain good sleep hygiene:** Traumatic events often disrupt our sleep. Some people report nightmares or find that nights are harder for them. Try to maintain regular sleep routines and get eight hours of sleep a night. Stay away from caffeine in the evening. Recent studies support turning off all electronics – televisions, phones, and computers – at least one hour before bedtime.
- 4) **Find balance in your life:** During a crisis people often report excessive behaviors – working too much, eating too much, sleeping too much, and even drinking too much. Avoid excessively watching television reports of the event. Set limits for yourself on activities and make sure you are taking care of yourself in all areas – social, behavioral, and spiritual. Our assumptions about the world being a safe place are shattered and anything we can do that gives our life meaning or gives us a plan of action will help speed our recovery.

Talking with Your Children About Traumatic Events

Here are some tips for talking with your children when they have witnessed or heard about traumatic events:

Listen to your children: Ask your children what they have heard about the traumatic event. What do they think happened? Let them tell you in their own words and answer their questions. Do not assume you know what they are feeling or what their questions will be. The easiest way to have this conversation might be while they are engaged in an activity: drawing, sitting on a swing, or driving with you in the car. Details that may be obvious to adults may not be to children. Be truthful, but don't tell them more information than they can handle for their age.

Focus on their safety: Once you understand their perception of the traumatic event, be clear that you will keep them safe and let them know adults (school, police, etc.) are working hard to make sure they will stay safe.

Pay attention to your reactions: Your children will be watching you carefully and taking their cues from you. If you can manage your anxiety about the traumatic event, your children will be more easily reassured.

Monitor your child's access to media: It will help if young children do not watch news reports or see the front page of the newspaper. Young children who watch a traumatic event on the TV news may think the event is still ongoing or happening again.

Watch for behavior changes: Your children may show you through their behavior that they are still struggling with what they have heard or seen. They may have physical complaints or regressive behaviors often including nightmares, insomnia, or bedwetting. They may feel guilty that they are responsible for the event, and need to be reassured that they are not responsible.

Maintain your routines: Sticking to your daily structure of activities—mealtimes, bedtime rituals, etc.—reduces anxiety and helps children feel more in control.

Keep the door open: Encourage your children to come to you with any questions or concerns and do not assume the questions will stop after a few days or even a few weeks. Let them know their fears and questions are normal and you will always make time for them. Remind them all questions are welcome.

Consider this a teachable moment: For older children, this traumatic event may lead to a discussion about ways they can help others who have experienced a tragedy. You can also ask them if they know how to keep themselves safe when they are away from home. Traumatic events make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activities we engage in make us feel less vulnerable.

Children and Trauma

Children respond to traumatic violence in a variety of ways; however there are several typical responses. These responses vary, depending on numerous factors, some of which are: the child's age, whether the child knew the individuals involved, and how "graphic" the violence was. Some common responses to trauma include:

- Concerns about fearing that the person (people) suffered
- Repeatedly visualizing the crime/incident in their minds
- Constant attempts to tell and retell the story of the crime/incident
- Need to reenact the crime/incident through play
- A desire to seek revenge [for those who knew the victim(s)]
- Feelings of guilt for not having intervened or prevented the crime

For some children, particularly those who knew the victim(s), signals of grief after a violent crime/incident include:

- Fear of death
- Fear of being left alone or sleeping alone
- A need to be with people who have been through the same experience
- Difficulty concentrating
- Drop in grades (during the school year)
- Physical complaints (headaches/stomachaches)
- Bedwetting
- Nightmares
- Fear of sleep
- Clingy behavior (wanting to be with and around parents more often)

What you can do to help children who have witnessed violence:

- Allow your child to talk about what he/she experienced or heard about
- Know that younger children may prefer to "draw" about their experiences
- Ask them what they saw and heard and what they think about the experience. Help them to label feelings and normalize their reactions ("That must have been pretty scary. It wouldn't surprise me if you keep thinking about it.")
- Spend some extra time with your child: have dinner together, make sure to keep bedtime routines
- Remind your child of things he/she likes to do to help feel better when upset (playing, reading, etc.)
- Children count on routines and structure. Keep routines as much the same as possible in the aftermath of an unpleasant event.

If you have concerns that your child may be having serious responses to trauma, you should speak to a counselor.

Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Families and Educators

High profile acts of mass violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children and youth who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved ones are at risk. They will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Adults themselves may struggle with the growing reality of mass violence in the United States, particularly gun violence. However, caregivers and school personnel *have a responsibility* to help children and youth feel safe by establishing a sense of normalcy and security, reinforcing their natural resilience, and talking with them about their fears.

1. **Reassure children that they are safe.** Remind them that you and other adults are there to protect them. Emphasize that schools are generally very safe, even though the news may contribute to the perception that they are not. Indeed, research is clear that schools are among the safest places for children and that the likelihood that any individual child will experience violence at school is very low.
2. **Validate children's feelings.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately. If appropriate for the child, acknowledge that the prevalence of mass violence in this country is disturbing and unacceptable, and that many adults are working to address the problem.
3. **Make time to talk.** Let children's questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.
4. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
 - a. *Early elementary school* children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
 - b. *Upper elementary and early middle school* children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to provide safe schools.
 - c. *Upper middle school and high school* students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize that adults are responsible for keeping students safe but that they can have a role in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g., not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to school safety made by students or community members), communicating any personal safety concerns to school administrators, and accessing support for their mental health needs.
5. **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school, in the community, and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
6. **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most

children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, who suffer from depression or other mental illness, or who have special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

7. **Limit access to television and social media attention to these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
8. **Correct misinformation.** Speculating or spreading rumors about the specifics of a violent event can unnecessarily escalate anxiety and fear. Emphasize that law enforcement and other designated authorities have the most accurate information. Counter misconceptions that people with mental illness are more inclined toward violence. This isn't true. In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators. Experts, including the FBI, emphasize that it takes a combination of multiple, often cascading, factors to lead someone to violence.
9. **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promotes physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed. Support healthy social connections.
10. **Talk about steps children and youth can take to make a positive difference.** The ability to take action, even in small ways, can help reduce anxiety and promote resilience. Help children and youth identify organizations they can support or things they can do either related to violence prevention or simply to make a positive contribution to their family, school, or broader community.

SUGGESTED POINTS TO EMPHASIZE WHEN TALKING TO CHILDREN

- Schools are safe places. School staff work with families and public safety providers (such as local police and fire departments, emergency responders, and hospitals) to keep you safe.
- Our school building is safe because ... (cite specific school procedures).
- Adults are responsible for keeping you safe, but we can all play a role in school safety. Be observant and let an adult know if you see or hear something that makes you feel uncomfortable, nervous, or frightened.
- There is a difference between reporting and ratting, tattling, or gossiping. You can provide important information that may prevent harm either directly or anonymously by telling a trusted adult what you know or hear.
- Although there is no absolute guarantee that something bad will never happen, it is important to understand the difference between the *possibility* of something happening and the *probability* that it will affect you (or our school community) directly. Even though any act of mass violence is horrible and unacceptable, the statistical likelihood of experiencing such violence in school is low. Based on data from the 2020–2021 school year, any given school might experience a shooting with casualties about once every 1,400 years. For perspective, 1,400 years ago was 623 A.D. Furthermore, the chance of getting injured or killed at school is about 1 in 450,000 (or .0000022%), with less than 3% of youth homicides of any kind occurring at school.
- Senseless violence is hard for everyone to understand. Doing things we enjoy, sticking to our normal routine, and being with friends and family help make us feel better and help keep us from worrying about the event.
- Sometimes people do bad things that hurt others. They may be unable to handle their anger, be under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or suffer from mental illness. Adults (parents, teachers, police officers, doctors, faith leaders) work very hard to get those people help and keep them from hurting others. It is important for all of us to know how to get help if we feel really upset or angry and to stay away from drugs and alcohol.

Talking to Children About Violence

- Stay away from guns and other weapons unless under adult supervision with the proper training. Tell an adult if you know someone has a gun. Access to guns is the leading risk factor for deadly violence.
- Violence is never a solution to personal problems. Students can be part of the positive solution by participating in antiviolence programs at school, learning conflict mediation skills, and seeking help from adults if they are or a peer is struggling with anger, depression, or other emotions they cannot control.

NASP has additional information for parents and educators on school safety, violence prevention, children's trauma reactions, and crisis response at www.nasponline.org.

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ADDRESSING GRIEF IN CHILDREN: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

Grief can result from many types of loss (e.g., death, divorce, transitions). How children grieve can be influenced by age, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, mental health, disabilities, and other factors. Grieving does not have a timeline, and schools and families should be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, developmental milestones, and other factors that could affect students months or years after the loss.

AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL GRIEF REACTIONS

Preschool

Acting out, regressive behaviors, being more quiet than usual, increased anxiety

Elementary School

Difficulty in school performance or attendance, sleeping, eating; irritability, aggression, and disruptive behaviors; social withdrawal; guilt, depression, and anxiety; repeated retelling of events

Middle & High School

Difficulty in school performance or attendance; avoidance, withdrawal, high-risk behaviors or substance abuse; difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing, or depression

GRIEF MILESTONES

Children may experience and reexperience:

- Acceptance of the loss
- Feelings/emotional pain
- Adjusting to changes/altered environments
- Finding ways to remember/memorialize the deceased

ADDITIONAL ATTENTION

Children exhibiting the following might require additional attention:

- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Wishing to be with the deceased loved one
- Fear of being alone
- Significant decreases in school performance or attendance
- Increased physical complaints

HOW TO HELP

- Maintain normal routines as much as possible.
- Ask questions to determine the child's understanding of the event and emotional state.
- Give the child permission to grieve.
- Provide age and developmentally appropriate answers/support.
- Connect the child with professionals and other trusted adults.
- Help children adopt healthy coping strategies.

THINGS TO AVOID

- Inaccurate descriptions when referring to the deceased, such as "They are sleeping," or "They went away"
- Reducing the loss (e.g., "It was just your great aunt")
- Imposing a time frame to complete the grieving process
- Overidentifying (e.g., "I know how you feel")
- Oversharing (e.g., "When I lost my mom to cancer"); not everyone handles loss and grief the same way



NASP 

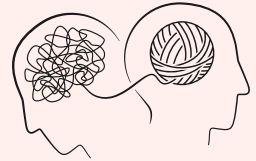
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
School Psychologists

For additional guidance, visit
www.nasponline.org/safety-and-crisis.

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MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

CITY OF NEWTON HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES



Riverside Emergency Services

Riverside is a local mental health agency that offers mobile crisis intervention.

Call 800-529-5077 for support.

988 Crisis Support

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 to talk with a trained counselor or chat online.

Behavioral Health Help Line (BHHL)

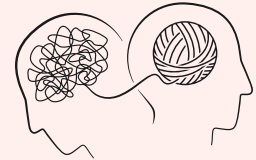
If you are struggling with mental health or substance use, the new BHHL connects MA residents directly to clinical care where and when they need it. It's free, available 24/7, and offers real-time interpretation in over 200 languages. Call or text 833-773-2445 or chat online.

***In a life-threatening emergency call 9-1-1.**

www.NewtonMA.gov/SocialServices

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

CITY OF NEWTON HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES



William James INTERFACE

Call 888-244-6843 to be matched with a licensed mental health provider. This mental health and wellness referral Helpline is available Mondays, Wednesdays & Fridays 9am-5pm and Tuesdays and Thursdays 8am-6pm.

Samaritans, Inc.

Suicide prevention services including 24/7 helpline (988), texting platform for youth and young adults, grief support services and community education.

LGBTQIA+ National Support Hotline:
888-843-4564

National Domestic Violence Hotline:
800-799-7233

Mental Health & Substance Use (SAMHSA) National Helpline:
800-662-4357

Veterans Crisis Line:
Call 988 & Press "1"
or Text 838255