



TRAUMATIC LOSS COALITIONS FOR YOUTH

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Helping Youth Cope After A Traumatic Event

Finding out about a recent violent incident such as someone being shot can be very frightening to children and adolescents even if the victim was not fatally wounded. Those that are eye witness to this type of violence are understandably more affected, but just hearing about a shooting can cause much upset in a child or teen.

Shootings that are random or where the perpetrator is not apprehended can add additional fears and worry for self and loved ones. Youth can experience intense feelings of vulnerability and a loss of a sense of control over their safety and security.

Parents and school personnel can be most helpful in guiding youth through the emotional effects of a traumatic event.

Some youth will want to talk and will seek out opportunities to tell the story of the event in an effort to come to terms with it and make some meaning out of it. It is important to listen, and listen some more. Taking the youth's fears seriously without judgment can be most helpful. After a frightening event many teens find themselves thinking about what happened even when they don't want to. They may have difficulty "getting it out of their head." They may have trouble sleeping and may experience nightmares. They may seem anxious and may not want to leave the house or they may become irritable and angry. While these reactions can be very normal right after a traumatic event, if they persist or get worse it may be a sign that the youth is in need of more assistance such as mental health counseling. Reassure your child that these reactions are normal given the frightening event that happened and should decrease over time. Also encourage them to tell you if the reactions are continuing or if they are getting worse.

Talk with your school administrator, or school counselors if you are concerned about your child. They are in a position to assist you in getting the assistance your child may need. Below are some reactions you may witness that may indicate a need for counseling.

While these signs and symptoms are normal in the early days and weeks after a traumatic event, if they continue or worsen it is an indication the teen could benefit from assistance from a mental health professional:

- symptoms of depression; sleeping difficulties; restlessness; anxiety
- difficulty concentrating, academic failure or indifference to school-related activities
- irritability; angry outbursts; physical fighting
- somatic complaints such as headaches; stomachaches; fatigue
- withdrawal from friends and family
- nightmares
- inability to stop thinking about the event
- worrying excessively about something bad happening to them or someone they love

Signs that the youth is in need of immediate assistance from a mental health professional:

- risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse; sexual experimentation; driving too fast
- self-injurious behavior such as cutting
- thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts

Resources:

Most frequently the time and attention of caring adults can effectively assist youth who have experienced a traumatic event. Those experiencing some of the signs listed above can benefit from more formalized counseling that can be provided by school and community mental health professionals.

These resources can be found by contacting school administrators; clergy; pediatricians and adolescent medicine doctors; local psychiatric screening centers, and other community mental health centers.

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