

Coping Strategies For Youth Following Trauma
A handout for families in the aftermath of trauma

When events of great magnitude create fear within us, our children need us to talk with them about what happened. We are often tempted to wait and see whether they bring it up, but often, silence is interpreted by them as a sign that this is something not to be mentioned. Often adults hope it isn't bothering youth if they aren't bringing it up.

You can begin by acknowledging what happened, such as:

- Nobody could have expected what happened to day when the train jumped the track. It was frightening for lots of people.
- It was a sad thing to see about the school shooting in the news.

Then move to a statement that reflects how people might feel:

- I bet lots of parents and kids were worried when they heard this.
- Sometimes when something frightening happens, we worry that it could happen here.

Finally, begin asking questions that invite your child to talk with you about their fears:

- What are your teachers and friends saying?
- What do you think most worries children about this?

Try to avoid being too quick to give answers, advice or your own reactions. That tends to shut down conversation. Instead, continue asking more questions or simply say, "un huh" to let them know you're listening. As they reveal misunderstandings, give clear information. Let them tell you their theories.

The younger the child, the more important it is to be very concrete in your language and concepts. Call death "death." How much detail you give is up to your judgment.

Youth often regress for a time in the aftermath of frightening events. Behavior in younger children might include bedwetting, clingy behavior in younger children and moving backward with responsibilities or wanting to be close to parents may occur with older youth. Give extra messages of your availability and tolerating regression without criticism is usually helpful.

Speak in hopeful terms as part of each conversation. This doesn't mean over their fears, but giving them context and hope.

Protect your children from the psychological saturation that comes from watching graphic television coverage. Monitor or eliminate their viewing. Talk through anything they do see that might be disconcerting. Children have little ability to screen the taking in of how very graphic some coverage is, and they have no history to give it context.

