



Helping Teenagers to Cope After A Traumatic Event

A Guide for Parents or Carers

As a parent you may be reading this because a tragic event has happened and you are unsure how to support your teenagers. This leaflet provides information on common reactions of young people to trauma, how parents can help and where both parents and young people can seek further support.

Young people react to trauma in many of the same ways that adults do. The world may suddenly seem dangerous, unsafe and uncertain. Like adults, teenagers may feel overwhelmed and not know how to cope.



Common Reactions of Teenagers to Traumatic Events

How teenagers respond to tragic events will vary from person to person. Their reaction can be influenced by many things for example, if they were exposed to the event, how emotionally close they were to anyone involved or hurt in the event and how they have coped with previous losses or traumas in their lives and the availability of support now.

Common reactions may include the following;

Physical Reactions

Young people can feel drained with no energy or so alert and buzzing that they can't relax or sleep. They may be unable to concentrate and be easily distracted. They may also experience headaches or stomach aches and lose their appetite or over eat.

Behavioural and Emotional Reactions

Young people may behave in a manner that is regarded as out of character for them e.g. they may become unusually quiet, unresponsive or fearful of going outside, or being left alone. They may feel irritable and lose their temper easily. Their relationships with parents and friends may change and they may respond strongly to parents. They may temporarily lose interest in life and question the meaning of their existence. Some young people may turn to alcohol and drugs thinking that this may help them cope.

Feelings of Stress

Showing signs of distress, being irritable, easily startled or nervous of anything that reminds them of the tragic event. Nightmares, not wanting to go out, poor concentration and difficulties with school performance are common signs of stress in this age group.

Feelings of Loss

Traumatic events may result in losses of life, home, and previous ways of being. For some young people this may be their first experience of death and loss so they may not have the skills to confidently deal with their feelings. For others, who have previous losses, this traumatic event may trigger memories and feelings from their past. Some young people may want to talk about their loss and share memories of the person they have lost, while others may not. Some young people will want to spend time on their own while others will want to be with their friends more than ever. Increasingly young people may turn to the internet as a source of support or information.

Recurring Memories of the Event

These can be experienced as flashbacks e.g. intrusive images, smells or sounds of the event. Flashbacks and recurring memories can leave young people feeling nervous, expecting the worst and result in increased heart rate, rapid breathing and can be tiring, distracting and unsettling. As a result young people can experience troubled sleep or frequent nightmares.

Guilt

Young people may blame themselves for what has happened and wish they had done things differently. Young people who survived the traumatic event may also feel survivor guilt if others had been injured or died.

How you as a Parent or Carer can Help

How you cope will impact on how your teenager copes. This can be difficult especially if you as a parent have been directly affected yourself by the traumatic event. Taking care of yourself is important. Getting enough sleep, sticking to routines, seeking support from others

and taking time to work through your own feelings will not only help you but you but also your teenager.

Listen to them

- Listen to what your teenager already 'knows' and correct mis-information. Be mindful not to burden them with unnecessary detail.
- Be available to and patient with your teenager who may have questions to ask and reassure him/her that that you are there to help them understand what happened.
- If there has been previous losses, or traumas, or pain in your teenagers life, this may be triggered again. Give them every chance to talk about it.
- Accept if for now the young person does not want to talk about the event. Asking them how they're feeling and checking in with them reassures them that you're there if and when they need to talk.

Talk with them

- Expect feelings of anger, sadness, confusion, and sometimes guilt. Let them know that it's normal to feel a range of feelings.
- When you talk about the event, be honest share clear accurate information. Focus on how they're feeling and how they're coping rather than the detail of the tragic event. Don't diminish the nature of the tragedy but only give as much detail as necessary.
- Talk about your own feelings and don't be afraid to show how the tragedy is affecting you. Talk about how you're coping and don't burden your young person with your fears and worries.

Offer Support

- Provide emotional reassurance and a sense of optimism about the future e.g. 'we will get through this'.
- Encourage the young person to re-establish daily routines as soon as appropriate e.g. going to school, sports and social activities.
- Give permission for the young person to express their feelings and accept that their way of coping may differ from yours e.g. (they may want to be with their friends)
- Encourage them to talk with friends and other important people in their life. The support of friends is very important at this time and can give security to young people coping with problems.
- Encourage them to participate in the wake or funeral to the extent that they feel comfortable.
- Help them find comforting routines as a way to cope. Encourage them to listen to favourite music, go for a walk, play football, or watch a DVD. This is a time to keep routines simple at home.
- Expect that concentration and attention is affected so temporarily lower your expectations of school and home performance for a few days or weeks.
- Many young people turn to the internet as a source of information and means of connecting with each other so it's important to monitor this and talk with your young person about it. Details of helpful web-sites are listed below.
- Internet based memorial web-sites are popular with young people in the days and weeks following a tragic death of a friend. Generally their use of such web-sites lessens with time but it's important to check in with your teenager and discuss their usage.
- Above all, be there for the young person. Give extra attention, support and affection.

Seek Help if Worried

Reactions following a traumatic event usually lessen in the days and weeks after a tragedy. If your teenager is in school it could help to inform the Principal so that staff are aware of what has happened and can be alert to any lingering signs of distress in the young person. If you as a parent are worried about your teenager and how he/she is coping talk to your GP. Your GP will discuss with you referral to an appropriate HSE service if required.

Signs that your teenager needs help include the following:

- Your teenagers behaviour is dangerous, reckless, or harmful
- They seem persistently depressed or anxious
- They start abusing substances such as drugs or alcohol or their use increases dramatically
- They won't communicate about where they're going, what they are going through or how they are feeling
- They don't seem to be showing signs of recovery
- They seem to be struggling to cope