

Helping children and young people cope with traumatic events

Extreme and distressing events like community violence are powerful and upsetting. Many people can have strong emotional or physical reactions like sadness, shock, fear, anger, confusion and exhaustion. Today and over the coming weeks, you and your child may be affected in many ways, as each person will react differently. Feelings of distress are normal and to be expected after a traumatic event.

What can parents and carers do?

Caregivers and family members can help by creating a safe and supportive environment, remaining as calm as possible, and reducing stressors. Children and adolescents need to know that their family members love them and will do their best to take care of them. Reassure children that they are safe and help create a sense of security.

Talk honestly and openly about the event in an age appropriate way

- Provide truthful but simple information that will help them understand what is fact and what is fiction. There is no need to share too much detail.
- Provide children with simple, concrete answers to their questions. If you cannot answer the question, it is okay to say, “I don’t know how to answer that”, “we may never know the answer to that”, “perhaps we can find someone to help us”.
- Let children know they can talk whenever they are ready, ask any question they have at any time. Children move at their own pace through grief just like adults do.

Provide children and young people with opportunities to express their feelings

- Encourage children and young people to talk about their thoughts and feelings – but don’t force them to. You may need to open the conversation for young children. Help children and young people to put words to feelings.
- Let them talk, write, or draw pictures about the event and their feelings.
- Validate the sadness or other feelings your child expresses, encouraging them to come to you.

Limit exposure to repetitive news reports about traumatic events

- Adults can shield young children from traumatic events by not letting them see or hear media reports or overhear adult conversations about the events.
- If older children are viewing media stories of distressing events, it is best to watch with them.

Reassure children they are safe and respond to their needs to feel secure

- Let young children sleep in your room (for a short time) or sleep with a light on if they are having trouble sleeping.
- Try to stick to usual routines, such as out of school activities, eating dinner together, and family time.
- Help them feel in control by letting them make some decisions for themselves, such as choosing their meals or picking out their clothes.

Look out for possible stress reactions

- Watch out for signs of stress in yourself and others and seek extra support if things become overwhelming. This includes talking about your feelings.
- Pay attention to sudden changes in behaviours, speech, language use, or strong emotions.
- Contact a health care provider if new problems develop, particularly if any of the following symptoms occur for more than a few weeks:
 - Having a racing heart and sweating
 - Being easily startled
 - Being emotionally numb
 - Being very sad or depressed
 - Having flashbacks (reliving the event).

Help Services

Reach out to one of the help lines if you become worried about yourself or someone else.

Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511

A 24/7 phone line staffed by mental health professionals that can direct individuals to local support services.

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

A free, confidential service that provides online or phone counselling for children and young people.

Lifeline: 13 11 14

24-hour crisis support for people experiencing a crisis or suicidal distress

Headspace: 1800 650 890

A local mental health support service for young people and their families, with a focus on early intervention.

13YARN: 13 92 76

Free crisis counselling support for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples

MensLine: 1300 78 99 78

24/7 telephone counselling support for men with concerns about mental health, relationships, stress and wellbeing.

Transcultural Mental Health Line: 1800 648 911

A phone line staffed from Monday to Friday between 9am and 4.30pm to support people in NSW from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Telephone interpreting service: 131 450

If you need interpreter assistance call TIS and say which language you need and the number you want to call. The operator will get an interpreter on the line to help with your conversation.