

Parkland FL: Trauma Response Resources

Help for Parents, Teachers & the Community

Our hearts go out to the people of Parkland, Florida who suffered such a horrific tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Human-triggered disasters are particularly difficult to cope with and recover from.

While everyone is disturbed by such a sudden and terrible set of events, some may feel and react to the news more intensely than others. Reactions may be exacerbated as stories emerge about the horrific attack and we learn more about the details of the violence and the personal stories of victims and their families. As memorials occur, we are exposed to the grief and raw reactions of survivors and grieving families. Events become more personal. Some of the people for whom this might trigger a heightened level of grief, stress, or anxiety include:

- **People who were involved in the event.** Students, teachers, school staff, parents and relatives of those directly involved that would encompass those who suffered the death of a loved one in the event. Children and classmates are also of concern.
- **People with a direct connection to the events.** This would encompass townspeople and neighbors. It could also extend to any who have some personal association with the community, such as people with friends or relatives who live there or former students of the school.
- **People who have been a victim of violence themselves.** This might encompass people who were prior victims of violence or assault, people who were held hostage, people who have been part of random shootings, or people who lost loved ones to random violence. The events might rekindle memories, grief, loss, fear and heightened anxiety.
- **People who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** This might include victims of 9/11, survivors of other shootings, veterans, or many others who experienced trauma and are not able to get beyond it. The events might trigger heightened memories, fear, anxiety, anger, stress, or disruption of eating or sleeping habits, among other things.
- **Children and young people.** Violent events are particularly frightening to children, and this event even more so because it included the specific targeting of schoolchildren. The sudden and random nature of events may threaten a child's sense of security. Some children may be intensely fearful of their own safety or the safety of loved ones.

Responding to Events

- **Be sensitive to others and how they experience events.** People handle stress and grief differently, and we don't always know what experiences others have had that might intensify a reaction. While some may hear such news and move on, others need time to process and react. Don't assume everyone feels things the same way that you do – be sensitive to those around you and let them express their feelings.
- **Limit exposure to gruesome details in the news.** The 24-hour nature of the Internet and cable news mean that we can be bombarded with nonstop news and images of a disastrous event. This continual exposure can exacerbate anxiety and fear, particularly for children.
- **Take positive action.** When violent events occur, it can shake our faith and trust in our fellow man. Counter these feelings by spending time with family and friends. It can also help to do something to reduce the feelings of helplessness that many experience in the face of such events: Help others. Give blood. Organize or take part in a memorial activity. Write letters. Make a donation. Volunteer.
- **Consider counseling.** If you or somebody else is having trouble coping with these events, counseling with a professional may be in order. Signs that you or a loved one may need help getting past this might include sleeplessness, heightened anxiety or phobias, and preoccupation with details of events.

Dealing with Children's Grief and Fear

In addition to the children who were directly affected by events, news of this frightening tragedy will be difficult for all kids to understand. The following resources offer some guidance.

- ✓ [Guide for Parents and Educators: Tips for Talking to Children and Youth After Traumatic Events \(PDF\)](#)
- ✓ [Explaining Death in a Child's Terms](#)
- ✓ [Children's Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event \(PDF\)](#)
- ✓ [Grief Support resources for Grieving Children & Families](#)
- ✓ [Talking to your children about the recent spate of school shootings](#)
- ✓ [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- ✓ [Kids' Health: Anxiety, Fears & Phobias](#)

Helping Kids Deal with the Aftermath of Difficult Events

- **Limit your child's exposure to the news.** Make sure that news about violent events is not playing over and over in the background on radios or TV. Watch news with your kids and discuss events and their feelings about things.
- **When frightening events occur, watch your own reaction when children are nearby.** When adults react dramatically, emotionally or fearfully, it can be very unsettling for children, who take cues from adults. While you should be truthful in your feelings, be careful not to let your behavior shatter their sense of safety and security.
- **Give comfort and reassurance.** Allow kids to express fear and sadness, don't dismiss bad feelings. Encourage questions so you can understand their fears. They may be feeling vulnerable themselves, or they may fear losing parents or siblings that they depend on and love.
- **Emphasize safety.** Let children know that while sad and bad things do indeed happen, they are rare events. Most people are good. Reassure them that you will take care of them and keep them safe, and that police and teachers will help to look out for their safety, too. Use this as a time to reinforce safety rules.
- **Channel things in a positive direction whenever possible.** Point out good things, such as the heroism and bravery of teachers, police and doctors, and the kindness of people in the community. Use bad events as a springboard to reinforce gratitude and appreciation for life; the importance of kindness and empathy, the importance of helping others.
- **Take positive action.** We all feel helpless in the face of terrible events, children even more so. Encourage your child to take an action, such as making a donation, writing a letter, going to a church service, or leaving flowers or mementos at a memorial.
- **Ensure that your communications are age appropriate.** Young children don't have a clear understanding of death, even if they say the words, so events may not affect them much; teens might suppress reaction entirely in a misguided attempt to appear cool or jaded.
- **Keep an eye on things to ensure that they adjust.** Watch for regression, clinging, hyperactivity in young children; at any age, kids who are anxious could exhibit sleep or eating disturbances. Teens or young adults may be obsessed with details of events. Watch how your kids play, how they talk about things to peers. If signs of disturbance persist, they may need the help of a professional counselor, so they don't stay "stuck" in anxieties or fear.