VICTIM AND WITNESS REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

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When an individual witnesses or is victimized by violence, they experience the symptoms of trauma. Over time, as people work through their feelings, they learn to move through the trauma and are once again able to focus on their lives and interests. If a victim or witness needs more than you are able to provide, seek professional assistance. (Many counselors can assist in working through feelings.

The following are expected reactions to trauma. Individuals may experience different reactions at different times. Remember: most of these reactions will diminish over time and are completely NORMAL.

- Shock, disbelief, numbness
- Anxiety, panicky feelings, hyper vigilance, exaggerated startle response
- Having intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, or unwanted memories of the event
- Loss of sense of security and safety
- Feeling detached from others
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Clinging to family and friends
- Anger, irritability, being argumentative
- Blaming themselves for the tragedy ("If only I. . .")
- Nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep, sleeping more than usual
- Changes in appetite
- Feeling like emotions are out of control ("I'll never stop crying")
- Regression: behaviors exhibited at an earlier age, i.e. sleeping with lights on
- Difficulty concentrating
- Deep sadness or depression
- Physical complaints such as headache, stomachache, muscle tension, nausea

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HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE WITH TRAUMA

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1. Be direct, simple, honest and appropriate. Explain truthfully what happened.

2. Listen to what the child or teen is feeling or asking you. Then respond according to the child or teen's needs and your own ability.

3. Encourage the child or teen to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful. So are feelings of anger.

4. Accept the emotions and reactions the child or teen expresses. Don't tell the child or teen how she or he should or should not feel.

5. Share your feelings with the child or teen. Allow the child or teen to comfort you.

6. Offer warmth and your physical presence and affections.

7. Be patient. Know that children or teens need to hear and/or tell "the story" and to ask the same questions again and again.

8. Reassure the child or teen that the loss is not contagious; that the death of one person does not mean that another loved one will also die or be injured.

9. Maintain order, stability and security in the child or teen's life.

10. Take your own advice. Take care of yourself. If you're not okay, the child or teen cannot be okay.

11. Many counselors can assist in working through feelings.

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TIPS FOR STUDENTS

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You have been through something very unexpected, violent and scary. Lots of other students are feeling what you are feeling. Everything you are feeling right now is NORMAL! Over time, your feelings will calm down and you will feel better. Here is some information that will help:

1. Don't be afraid of your feelings. If you feel like crying, go ahead. Crying will help you to feel better, because it lets go of stress.

2. Everyone has different feelings at different times. Accept your own feelings and those of others.

3. If you feel sad or angry a lot, or if you feel numb, talk about it with a friend, a teacher, a parent or a counselor.

4. If you are afraid, nervous or spaced out, don't worry---that's normal.

5. You might have nightmares or think about bad things a lot. Try to talk it out with someone. Other ways you can work out your feelings are to write, draw, play music, hike, run, or bike.

6. The grown ups around you have a lot of feelings about what happened, too. Be patient. They are doing the best they can.

7. If you're jumpy or bad-tempered, know that this will go away.

8. Don't pressure yourself or others to "get it together". Everyone heals in their own way. It takes time.

9. Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you feel like you need help with your feelings, ask your parent or teacher to arrange for a counselor to help.

10. When you feel you are ready, try to go back to some of the activities you enjoyed before.

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TIPS FOR TEACHERS, STAFF, AND MENTORS

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1. Be sure that YOU are calm and ready to talk before expecting students to do so. Take deep breaths. Use your support system. If you are in crisis, you cannot be effective.

2. Learn the symptoms of trauma and let students know that what they are feeling and experiencing is NORMAL and will be less frequent and painful over time. Let them know that everyone reacts differently, on their own schedule, and all feelings are acceptable. Let them know that asking for help or seeing a counselor is okay.

3. Encourage discussion of events. This allows students to express some of the emotions. Discussion also dispels rumors and misinformation.

4. Encourage support systems. Groups become vital to re-establish a sense of safety and belonging.

5. Do not expect students to "tough it out" or "move on". Grieving and trauma recovery are processes that can't be rushed.

6. Remember that one of the hallmarks of trauma is difficulty concentrating and processing information. Do not expect students to perform well in the weeks immediately following the traumatic event.

7. Encourage alternative ways of expressing feelings. Suggest journals, drawing, painting, music, dance, etc. Many students cannot express themselves verbally.

8. If a student exhibits symptoms that are overwhelming or disruptive, suggest outside counseling by referring the parent(s) to victim compensation.

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TIPS FOR PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

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1. Encourage discussion of the traumatic event. Be sure that YOU are calm and ready to talk before expecting children or teens to do so. Take deep breaths. Talk with your support system. If you are in crisis, you cannot be effective.

2. Learn the symptoms of trauma and let your child or teen know that what they are experiencing is normal and expected. Tell and show them that they are loved and valued. Be patient.

3. Sleep disturbances are one of the most common symptoms. Nightmares, difficulty falling or staying asleep and fitful sleep are normal reactions.

4. A child or teen may experience regression. If they revert to behaviors from an earlier age, allow it. This will pass over time. Examples are: sleeping with the light on, wanting to be held, sucking their thumb, and wetting the bed.

5. Talk to your child or teen and LISTEN to what they say. Accept and support their feelings, no matter what they are. Do not try to talk them out of how they are feeling. Let them know that all of their feelings are normal.

6. Encourage time with their friends and support systems.

7. Loss of concentration and achievement is a symptom of trauma. Do not expect your child or teen to perform at their usual level for a while.

8. Many counselors can assist you in this difficult time.

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