

Helping children and young people deal with emotionally distressing events

In light of recent events in Sydney and globally, an increasing number of children and adolescents are being exposed to continuous graphic and violent content through a constant streaming of social media and news outlets. It seems that violence and crime receive disproportionate media coverage, and this can evoke distress, confusion and fear in children and young people, and may lead them to develop a distorted view that the world is a dangerous and unsafe place.

It is important for parents and caregivers to engage in open and honest discussions with children and young people (in an age-appropriate way) about their observations, perceptions and feelings about such events, and in doing so provide support and reassurance, alleviating any concerns and misunderstandings they may have.

Furthermore, it is imperative for children and young people to recognise that these occurrences are rare here in Australia and amidst tragic events, there are always examples and instances that exemplify the best of human nature. Acts of altruism and acts of support to fellow human beings in times of need, serve as a poignant reminder of human beings' compassion and willingness to help others.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) recommends the following strategies for people impacted by a tragic event or have heard about it from others or from the media:

- ◆ **Seek support:** Reach out to friends, family, or a mental health professional for emotional support and guidance.
- ◆ **Practice self-care:** Engage in activities that promote relaxation and well-being, such as exercise, mindfulness, and spending time in nature.
- ◆ **Express emotions:** Allow yourself to express and process your emotions and make space for and normalise all emotions including shock, grief, fear and sadness.
- ◆ **Establish routines:** Establishing daily routines can provide a sense of stability and control in the aftermath of trauma.
- ◆ **Limit exposure to media:** Avoid or limit exposure to media, including social media, that may exacerbate distressing symptoms.
- ◆ **Practice grounding techniques:** Grounding techniques, such as deep breathing or focusing on sensory experiences, can help manage distressing symptoms and promote a sense of safety.
- ◆ **Seek professional help:** If symptoms persist or interfere with your daily functioning, consider seeking professional, evidence-based help from a psychologist experienced in treating trauma.

The APS has the following advice for parents and carers speaking with, or caring for children, who witnessed the event or have heard about it from others or in the media:

- ◆ **Talk about the event** - Encourage (but don't force) children to talk about their thoughts and feelings about the events. Let them know that talking about it can be a good thing.
 - ◇ Provide children with opportunities to express their feelings - Help children and young people to put words to feelings.
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 - ◇ They may talk about it in their own time or after a few days rather than the first time you have a conversation, so try to be open to this.
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 - ◇ Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.
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 - ◇ Let them know that crying is fine when they need to.

- ◆ **Monitor and limit media exposure** - Children can become distressed and fearful after watching repeated images of frightening events on the TV or social media so restrict their exposure to traumatic material.

- ◆ **Engage in age-appropriate honest discussions** - By their very nature, tragedies are especially difficult to explain, and it can be very challenging to understand 'unthinkable' events.
 - ◇ It is normal for children (and adults) to seek an explanation of why a tragedy occurred.
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 - ◇ By understanding, we are often trying to reassure ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future, so be prepared for 'why' questions.
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 - ◇ Uncertainty is particularly distressing, so these questions can be hard, but children need our best answers.

The following links from the APS include helpful tips for helping children and young people to cope with distressing events.

<https://psychology.org.au/getmedia/a61cf9d-dc4c-40f3-b94d-65995c85995b/helping-children-affected-tragic-events.pdf>

Strategies for coping with tragic events

<https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/tragic-events-community-violence>

Helping children cope after a tragic event

<https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/tragic-events-community-violence/helping-children-cope-after-tragic-events>

Tragic events and community violence

<https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/tragic-events-community-violence>

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