

Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth

Phone: 732-235-2810 Fax: 732-235-9861

<http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/TLC>

Community Tragedy Stress, Trauma and Media Overload

Dr. Donna A Gaffney, FAAN
Advisor for Education and Research, Project Rebirth

There will be a great deal of media coverage focusing on the Parkland High School shooting in Florida. While many networks and cable outlets may take appropriate steps to avoid showing traumatic or graphic images there will be some print, television and radio organizations flooding the environment with reminders of this horrific community tragedy and its aftermath. It is possible to limit media consumption in your home, but you may not have control over what your children see and hear outside of the house.

Over the past decade media messages of destruction, violence, injury and loss have changed the social environment of young people. These events include 9/11, Columbine, Virginia Tech, natural disasters and other mass casualties. Researchers have found that contact with such events, *through the media*, can negatively impact children's emotional functioning and perceptions of the world. To counterbalance the potential of such negative influences, it is important to create a plan of action that will minimize and hopefully avoid media overload. In addition to the importance of developing 'media literacy' skills in the home (i.e. understanding why and how media messages are sent) there are other factors to consider when preparing a family media plan:

- How closely your family members and friends were impacted by this event.
- The ages of your children.
- Other losses or traumatic events experienced by your family.

Be Prepared

First, think about how and why media texts (TV programs and news, movies, radio, newspapers and magazines, internet, social networking, music, etc) are used. Consider the questions below to help your children understand media messages as well (The Center for Media Literacy):

- Who created this message and why are they sending it?
 - Providing information to the public on the tragedy.
 - Compare this to the "saturation" experienced with other events (Superbowl, elections, the Olympics, Academy awards, etc.)
- What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
 - Dramatic approaches, music, re-enactments, graphic images, interviews with victims, etc.
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in this message?
- What is omitted from this message? Why do you think it was left out?
 - Balance tragedy with resilience and recovery.
 - What are the positive things that came after, for the community, the nation, and the world? How did people reach out and help each other?
- How might different people interpret this message?
 - People who were directly affected? Lost a family member or friend?
 - Children too young to understand.

Suggestions For Children And Adolescents

They may become more irritable or defiant. Children and even teens may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It's common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. Children/Teens may think about this event, even when they try not to. Their sleep and appetite routines may change. In general, you should see these reactions lessen within a few weeks.

- **Be a positive role model.** Consider sharing your feelings about the events with your child/teen, but at a level they can understand. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims and their families. You may share some worry, but it is important to also share ideas for coping with difficult situations like this tragedy. When you speak of the quick response by law enforcement and medical personnel to help the victims (and the heroic or generous efforts of ordinary citizens), you help your child/teen see that there can be good, even in the mist of such a horrific event.
- **Be patient.** In times of stress, children/teens may have trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Adolescents who are seeking increased independence may have difficulty expressing their needs. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).
- **Extra help.** Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/teens' abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

Talking to Children about the Shooting

The recent shooting has evoked many emotions—sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger. Children who are struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images of the shooting may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance.

- **Start the conversation.** Talk about the shooting with your child. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in your child’s mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about this. Chances are your child has heard about it, too.
- **What does your child already know?** Start by asking what your child/teen already has heard about the events from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what he or she knows or believes. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the shooting are known.
- **Gently correct inaccurate information.** If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age-appropriate language.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about the incident. For example, she may ask if it is possible that it could happen at your workplace; she is probably really asking whether it is “likely.” The concern about re-occurrence will be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. While it is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk, she is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has for keeping safe in the event of any crisis situation. Do give any information you have on the help and support the victims and their families are receiving. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.
- **Limit media exposure.** Limit your child’s exposure to media images and sounds of the shooting, and *do not allow your very young children to see or hear any TV/radio shooting-related messages.* Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often are aware of what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of this shooting.
- **Common reactions.** Children/Teens may have reactions to this tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, they may have more problems paying attention and concentrating.

Under 13 Years: Viewing any programming related to the shooting *should* be preceded by family discussion of what happened (to the best of the adults' knowledge). Children under 7 years of age should not watch any programming or news reports.

To begin the conversation, *first ask* your children/teens what they've heard (from friends, other parents, classmates, and the media) and what questions they have. You will need to provide them with factual information, i.e. when we talk about the human loss during the shooting, it is also important to point out that many people survived, reached safety, helped each other and received immediate medical care.

Over 14 Years: Young people over 14 years will be especially focused on the circumstances of this event- a popular movie, a midnight showing, summer time activities that they have most likely participated in themselves in the past. These experiences are worth exploring and provide an opportunity to clarify misconceptions and reassure safety procedures. In addition, you may need to clarify and provide factual information.

Watch with Your Family: It is strongly recommended that school age children/teens of any age should NOT watch any shooting-related programming alone. They should be with caring adults, family members, and good friends. First determine if the program will be appropriate for your children (age, personal experience). By joining with your child/teen you will know the exact content of the program as well as the context of the information. You will also have the opportunity to observe their reactions (tearfulness, fidgeting, crying, very quiet or even "silly" remarks or behaviors). Look for these signs that your child may be experiencing intensified fears or anxieties or changed behaviors such as sleeplessness, stomach distress, crying, or worrying about safety and security. Do not ask, "Are you okay?" or "Are you upset?" Instead point out the behavior you have noticed and ask what he/she is thinking or feeling, "I see you are kind of quiet, tell me what you're thinking?" You also have the benefit of offering comfort and security to your child or teen through physical proximity.

Talk and Share: If you and your family do watch/listen/read about the tragedy, talk about it and reactions to it, the physical reactions as well as feelings and thoughts. Plan time to talk in a quiet, comfortable and familiar place. Don't let children/teens go to bed without having a chance to talk about their reactions, even if you think they are "okay."

Share your own thoughts and feelings. Don't hesitate to "open" communication with your own reactions. If you cry, don't try to hide it, acknowledge that this event has affected many people. However, *be confident* about safety and security issues. Children take their cues from adults and how we respond to media; they will watch your behavior and determine if they really are safe. Praise your children when they suggest their own hopeful and positive thoughts.

Acknowledge children's/teen's feelings. Recognize, accept and respect your children's feelings. Let them know that others feel the same way.

Provide reassurance regarding safety and security in simple, age-appropriate words. Don't give false reassurance; be realistic and honest without being an alarmist.

Explore Self-Care Strategies: Let children and teens know that there are ways to feel better as we cope with uncomfortable feelings. Help them identify what provides relief and support. Encourage them to use those strategies, especially talking to others about their feelings. Read/tell a favorite story before bed, offer a favorite food or drink, play favorite or relaxing music, give/get a hug, talk and depending on your beliefs, pray or meditate.

- Check in the next morning: how did your family sleep, were there any dreams, disturbing thoughts, etc.

For those who have recently experienced loss or another crisis, viewing and reading about stories and programs related to the shooting may bring back feelings from these earlier traumas.