

When a Terrorist Act Occurs

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Overview

Ways to cope and to offer support to children after an act of terrorism.

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An act of terrorism makes all of us fear for our safety and the safety of our children. It can shake our feelings of security and leave us feeling vulnerable. Here are some ways to find support and to help your child and the people you love in the hours and days ahead.

When a terrorist act occurs

An act of terrorism can be painfully difficult to understand. Authorities may have no clear answers for days or weeks afterward about how or why the terrorist act occurred or how many people were injured or lost their lives. It's normal to feel overwhelmed by the event. You may feel afraid, unsafe, or at a loss for what to do. You may have trouble concentrating, and feel so consumed by the tragedy that you have trouble focusing on little else. You may feel angry that the event occurred and that "authorities" did nothing to protect you. You may feel helpless. All of these feelings are normal reactions. You may also feel:

- shock
- numbness
- anxiety
- fear
- grief
- sadness and crying

You may have difficulty making decisions or solving everyday problems, and you may feel generally confused. You may even have difficulty sleeping or experience nightmares. These feelings will eventually ease, but it's possible that they may continue for days or weeks. Try to talk about your fears with loved ones or co-workers, and continue to maintain as normal a schedule as possible at work and home.

Finding support

The first and most important step to take after a traumatic event is to seek support from others.

- Spend extra time with people you love and trust. Talk about the event and process what has happened.
- Use company resources to help you through this difficult time. Resources are available to you through your employee assistance program (EAP) or employee resource program. If you do not remember how to contact one of these programs, ask your supervisor or human resources (HR) representative to provide you with the information.
- Avoid using alcohol, prescription, or non-prescription drugs to handle your emotions.
- Try not to compare yourself with others. Everyone is different and reacts differently to traumatic events.
- Give yourself and your family time to react. It's important to maintain as normal a schedule as possible, but at first you will need time to absorb information and come to terms with this frightening and tragic event.

Talking with your child about a terrorist act

Children react to trauma in many of the same ways that adults do. The world may suddenly seem dangerous and unsafe. Your child may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and not understand how to cope with these feelings. Children may also have difficulty understanding what a terrorist is or why a stranger would want to hurt people. Here is how you can help:

- Help your child talk about the act of terrorism. Let your child know that it's normal to feel worried or upset. Try to listen carefully and understand what your child is saying. Help younger children use words like "angry" and "sad" to express their feelings.
- Reassure your child that events like these are extremely rare. You might say, "This is a really sad time for everyone in our country. Fortunately, events like this are very rare."
- Explain to your child that terrorism is a political act and not one that's aimed at individuals. Reassure your child that your family is safe.
- Stress that you are there to take care of your child. Remember to say, "I love you, I'm here to take care of you."
- When you talk about the event, be honest and share clear, accurate information. Don't diminish the nature of the tragedy or dismiss your child's worries. If your child has any misconceptions, correct false fears and misinformation. If your child knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with your child about his fears.
- If your child is old enough to watch the TV coverage, watch the news together. The news reports may be filled with terrifying images and your presence will provide a sense of security. You may want to limit the amount of TV news your child sees. Too much repeated coverage could just heighten your child's anxiety.

- Try to be patient if your child asks the same questions again and again. Let your child talk as often as she needs to about the act of terrorism. Talking about the event with you is a way for your child to gain control of feelings that follow a trauma.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings. Admit that you are saddened by what has happened, and show that you care. But don't burden your child with your fears and worries. Your child will look to you as a model for coping with this trauma.
- Encourage your child to talk with friends and other important people in his life about the event.

Common reactions children may have

The way your child reacts to a traumatic event may depend on her age. Younger children may refuse to attend school while older children may withdraw or argue more with parents. Here are some common reactions children may have after traumatic events and ways to help your child deal with them:

- Regression. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. Be patient and offer your child extra comfort at this time.
- Fear. Your child may feel afraid that the event is going to happen again. Reassure your child that adults are working to keep everyone safe. Some children may also express their anxiety by reverting to past fears such as fear of the dark, strangers, or animals.
- Sleep disorders. Some children have difficulty falling asleep, others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If your child is younger, he or she may find comfort from a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- Feeling helpless. Children may withdraw or even act out aggressively by fighting with parents or siblings as a way of expressing feelings of helplessness and fear. Children may also be very quiet or very agitated.
- Physical ailments. Children may experience stomachaches, headaches, or other physical ailments.

Ways to support your child through a trauma

- Remember that this may be the first time your child is experiencing a traumatic event. Your child may have many feelings — anger, sorrow, fear, confusion, and sometimes guilt if others have died. Be there to console your child. Assure your child that all of these feelings are normal.
- Your child may feel afraid and upset following the trauma and may no longer feel “normal.” She may show her fears by having nightmares, crying, being clingy, or being overly fearful. These behaviors are normal. Try to be loving and understanding. Your child needs extra love and support from you during this difficult period. Tell your child to come to you if he or she is having trouble sleeping, coping, or needs to talk.

- Don't assume that just because your child hasn't said something about the event that she is OK and isn't affected by it. Sometimes, children are confused by a traumatic event, want to avoid talking about it, or are afraid to show their vulnerability. You may need to take the first step and bring up the subject when you and your child have time together.
- Help your child find comforting routines as a way to cope. Don't keep your child home from school, which can be a place of tremendous support for children. Encourage your child to listen to favorite music, do artwork, play basketball, or participate in other normal activities. This is a time to keep routines simple at home.
- Encourage your child to become involved as a way to overcome feelings of helplessness. Being active in a campaign to help victims of the disaster or writing letters to people who have helped or to victims can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.
- Allow your child to express his or her fears. Younger children may be best able to do this through drawing. Some children may talk to family pets or dolls.
- Temporarily lower expectations of school and home performance. Your child's attention and emotional energy may be focused elsewhere for a few days.
- Encourage your child to talk with other adults about the event. This might be a teacher, school counselor, member of the clergy, or someone else from the community that your child feels close to and trusts.
- Most important of all, try to be there for your child. Give extra attention and support. Be affectionate. Give hugs. Make efforts to spend time together, have meals together, and be together as a family.

Staying strong as a parent

Keep in mind that your own behavior is a powerful example for your child. How your child copes with a traumatic event will depend to some measure on how you cope. Your child is looking to all the adults around him — parents, teachers, relatives, clergy, and others — to find positive ways to deal with the event. It's important for you to stay strong so you can support your child.

- Get enough sleep, eat well-balanced meals, and try to stick to regular routines.
- Seek support from others. Because you are also responding to trauma, it is very important to talk to other parents, friends, counselors, and adults. Share your anxieties and frustrations with them. And don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Give yourself time to reflect on what happened.