

HELPING OURSELVES AND OUR KIDS WITH STRESS REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Mayflower Crisis Support Team

When any of us are exposed to extraordinary, horrifying or tragic events, we are bound to feel less safe in the world. We are likely to struggle, for a period of days or weeks, with difficult reactions to these events. These reactions may include:

- Recurring painful thoughts or images associated with the distressing events
- Increased feelings of vulnerability and worries about the safety of loved ones
- Fearfulness when exposed to situations reminiscent of those in which the distressing events occurred.
- Feelings of grief, sadness, or depression
- Feelings of guilt over surviving when others died, or over not having been able to help
- Loss of interest in the daily involvements and activities that usually bring satisfaction
- Difficulty sleeping, perhaps along with nightmares
- A state of over-arousal, leading to jumpiness, restlessness or irritability
- Heightened emotionality
- Physical symptoms, such as fatigue, GI distress, headache, shortness of breath
- Mental symptoms, such as inability to concentrate, or memory problems
- Re-experiencing painful memories of earlier losses and traumas we have experienced

The more directly we were impacted by the distressing events, the more likely it is that we will experience some of these reactions. Children who were exposed to the events can be expected to experience more extreme reactions, since they have less capacity to keep the degree of threat represented by events in perspective. Sometimes even children who were not directly exposed to the events, but who have learned of them indirectly, or who know that their parents have been exposed to them, may have reactions. Children tend to display their distress differently from adults, and the younger the child, the more this tends to be the case. In addition to experiencing some of the reactions listed above, children may demonstrate some of the following reactions:

- An increase in aggressive behavior
- Expressing concerns through play or drawings that include elements of the traumatic events, i.e. increased play that includes violence, use of guns.
- Return to less mature behaviors, such as tantrums or security seeking, that had previously been outgrown
- Adoption of compulsive or superstitious behaviors designed to ward off further danger,

Dealing with our own reactions

It is important to realize that all of the reactions cited above are common, normal reactions to extraordinary events. Their typical course is for these reactions to gradually subside over the ensuing weeks, although it is normal to occasionally re-experience some of the reactions much later than this, when new events occur that remind us of the original trauma. Those most closely impacted by the events can generally expect a longer period during which they will continue to experience reactions. The normal course of healing has many ups and downs, with periods of difficulty interspersed with periods when we feel back to ourselves. Over time, the hard

Dealing with our own reactions cont.

periods become both less intense and less frequent. During the time when we are experiencing reactions, we can help ourselves through the following steps.

- Using our support systems. Suffering in silence is much more painful than when we accept support from others and offer it in return. This is a good time to talk over our reactions with family members, friends and co-workers, and to draw on our spiritual resources.
- Maintaining healthy lifestyles. Good sleep and nutrition replenish our resources. Overuse of caffeine and alcohol add to our stress load.
- Getting regular exercise is particularly helpful. Exercise serves as a healthy distraction and tension reliever; it contributes to a positive sense of self; and it promotes more rapid elimination of stress chemicals from our systems.
- Providing periods of respite from grief and worry. Getting involved in positive activities with friends and family, or even pursuit of worthwhile, solitary tasks, provides useful distractions, a sense of normalcy, and renewed confidence in the future.
- Do something to help. Taking active steps to help others who have been more directly impacted by the tragedy relieves feelings of helplessness.
- Avoid taking on new, stressful projects, if they can be postponed.

Helping our kids to deal with their reactions

Children will need our help to keep their fears in perspective. They can use many of the same steps outlined above, but they will also need our reassurances that we can handle the challenges posed by the traumatic events and can keep them safe. The younger the child, the more they will rely on us to provide reassurance and protection from the impact of events. Older children will also need our help but will be able to draw on their own resources, as well. Some additional steps to help children include the following:

- Be tolerant of the child's increased security needs and respond with reassurance.
- Limit the child's exposure to media coverage and adult conversation about the traumatic incidents. The younger the child, the more exposure should be limited.
- Be open to the child's expressions of fears and concerns and be prepared to respond with helpful explanations and reassurance.
- Plan family activities that provide a sense of security, and that demonstrate that life will go on for the family
- Facilitate the child's return to normal daily activities, such as school and athletics.

When reactions to trauma and tragic events do not improve with the passage of weeks, it is important to obtain further support for yourself or your child.