

SOME HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOLLOWING TRAUMA

This is a handout designed for middle and high school students in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Traumatic reactions are likely to occur for most anyone who witness or survive events which are outside our realm of what you think of as “normal”. It is different than grief. With grief, you are struggling with the *feelings and emotions* of loss. With trauma, you didn’t need to know the others involved in the crisis to have a strong reaction. Although you may have strong emotions in response to a traumatic event, *they are primarily in response to your thoughts and memories*. Trauma is more psychological or brain-centered. Grief is more emotion or heart-centered.

Witnessing a traumatic death, doing CPR on an accident victim, being on the scene of a fire... all of these are examples of experiences which might result in a traumatic reaction inside you. Your brain decides to lock the memory of the event away because it is too much to deal with all at once. But then in the following days, your brain may bring it back up to you over and over again *so that you’ll try to deal with it*. But every time that happens, your body gets anxious again, and it makes you feel like it is actually happening again. Here are some things to know that might help you.

- You may continue to have feelings surface over the next several weeks or months. It is important when that happens to find someone safe to talk with, and to vent. It is helpful if that person doesn’t judge your feelings in any way, or try to get you to feel differently. Just listening. BUT! You do need to be responsible for your actions, so if anger is what you are experiencing, vent it appropriately and verbally – don’t act out in any way that could be harmful or cause injury to you or others.
- Sometimes when we feel traumatized or shaken, we doubt our relationships. This is an important time to work at reaffirming relationships with family and friends.
- When we feel traumatized, we often either feel like we wish we were younger, (when things seemed safer and our parents seemed to be able to protect us) or older (thinking that if we were more mature we could take better care of our fears). Those feelings are not unusual, and it is helpful just to remember that this is one of the normal responses to trauma. Acknowledge the feelings and take good care of yourself, but don’t rush to maturity over this.
- As the initial shock of the trauma begins to wear off, many of us continue on a roller coaster of feeling *nothing* and then having *lots* of feelings come crashing in on us. If we continue talking about our fears and frustrations, these hills and valleys will begin to level out, and over time we will integrate this event into the greater context of life.
- At times when our emotions are still coming and going, it can be difficult to concentrate in school or at work. This, too, will get better as we mend.
- Having clear information is helpful in putting an event into perspective. Because of that need, if there is newspaper coverage of this event, most of us will be wanting to read about it. If there is a legal process involved, additional news coverage will be involved. Each time this occurs, it may trigger some of the feelings we originally had. This is not unusual. It will be helpful to talk it out again.
- Tragedies often make us feel like life has somehow changed so dramatically that you view the future less optimistically. Realize that, once you have dealt with the feelings and the aftermath, and when some more time has passed, this event will be its own chapter in your

life, but it won't necessarily continue to have the same power it has now. Later it will be just one piece in the context of your whole life.

- Frightening dreams or intrusive flashbacks may occasionally occur. If this is happening very often, or if you begin having ongoing trouble sleeping, or if your appetite changes much either way (eating lots more or lots less), talk with your parents. These can be signs of depression or a more long-term traumatic reaction and it is helpful to see a counselor who can help you manage and overcome this. Do what you can to make your world a safe place.
- Fears of recurrence are not uncommon, nor are fears about "what's going to happen next?" Keep talking to good listeners.
- This may be the first time someone you know has died. Grief is the normal response to any significant loss. The first time we go through grief, we often are confused or fearful of how it feels. Disbelief, anger, sadness and depression are all common. Although grief *feels* like it's dangerous, it is just very uncomfortable.
- People react to traumatic events in varying degrees. This is due to many factors – how well you knew people involved, whether some other similar event has ever happened in your community or in your life. Accept that we can't know why some people feel more or less impact.
- It is important to restore a sense that school is the place that students feel is their community. Invest in school activities and school spirit, and make this a time of pulling together in a positive way.
- If there is one special teacher who has "been there for you" or one in whom you feel lots of trust, let that teacher know that s/he has been a helpful force in your life. Let teachers know what they've done that has been helpful for you.
- Somatic complaints (tummy aches, headaches, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, etc.) are physical symptoms telling us that our emotional selves are still struggling. Don't be fearful of them, but pay attention to them and see if you can find ways to deal constructively with them. Make a list of 25 things you enjoy doing or things that help you calm down. Unattended to, these somatic complaints can move into real illness.
- Talk with your parents about who they reacted to this event. See in what ways your reactions were similar, and how different. Remember, both sides (parents and youth) need to be accepting of each other's experiences.
- Here are some of the most common responses to trauma:
 - Feeling detachment or guilt (remember, you didn't make it happen, and you couldn't have prevented it).
 - Feeling self-conscious about our fears or other emotional responses (we feel like friends might label us abnormal, and often we don't realize they feel the same way).
 - Increased use of drugs/alcohol/acting out in some way. Drugs are often just an attempt to medicate ourselves against our pain or fears. Remember that if we don't deal with our feelings, they'll deal with us!! Better to cope in healthy ways than to use drugs or alcohol.
 - Reckless or self-destructive behavior (sometimes our response to trauma is "well, now what do I have to lose?") Talk about those feelings and take good care of yourself).
 - Relationship changes (trauma puts stress on us and on our relationships with others. It is also sometimes a cause of great changes in our values. If WE change, our relationships do, too.)

- Desires to take revenge (two things about this don't work. One is that we set ourselves up for consequences, and the other is that it isn't constructive to anyone else).
- Our own self-identity changes (those changes can be for the better or they can be not so good. Talk to someone about how those attitudes have changed and see if you can figure out how it is related to the traumatic event).

Sometimes a siren on a passing emergency response vehicle or some other sound or thought can trigger us back into feeling like we're in the midst of the crisis again. When that happens, try looking at something near you that reminds you that this is a different day than the crisis. Sometimes it works to wear a new or different ring or something like a charm around your neck or to carry a little trinket in the pocket. When you begin to be triggered, look at the object and talk out loud to yourself, reminding yourself that you are not in danger, that it just feels that way.

If you continue to have flashbacks of nightmares, find a counselor who understands trauma.