WELLSPRINGS SOLUTIONS LLC
COUNSELING AND WELLNESS SERVICES

Helping Your Child or Teen Process a Traumatic Event

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It is understandable to feel overwhelmed and scared when your child has experienced a school shooting threat and was forced to go into lockdown mode without you.

It can be hard to know what do to in times like these, so our group practice of professional counselors created this brief resource for you in your time of need as you and your child are dealing with the results of this traumatic experience.

It is vital to take the time to listen to your child and provide them with a safe space to express their feelings, thoughts, and fears.

Establishing an open dialogue between you and your child can help them to process their emotions by creating a safe, non-judgmental environment to foster healing and support.

Things you might see in your child after a traumatic event:

A traumatic event can cause the brain to go into an alarm state, which might look like various behavior and habit changes. When the brain goes into an alarm state, it can manifest itself in multiple ways.

Common symptoms can include increased heart rate, sweating, difficulty concentrating, difficulty breathing, fear or panic, acting out behaviors like more yelling or temper tantrums, obsessive thinking, a need to stay busy, or a desire to be away from others.

As time goes on, you may see your child exhibiting the following behaviors:

- sleeping more
- sleeping less
- isolating
- seeming withdrawn
- lacking interest in preferred activities
- general disinterest
- lack of engagement

It is important to recognize these signs of an alarm state and take steps to reduce the stress and anxiety associated with it, such as deep breathing, mindful meditation, and talking to a loved one or mental health professional.

What can you do?

1 Regulate yourself before approaching your child:

This is a stressful time for your child, so it is important to ensure you are calm and regulated before approaching them. We understand that events such as these leave us feeling angry or wanting to blame other people, situations, or organizations. As a parent, you might also be tempted to jump into problem-solving mode and comment on what should have been done, how it should have been handled, etc. However, showing your anger to your child or making angry comments will only create more stress and anxiety for them. If you are having trouble remaining regulated during these conversations with your child, we strongly encourage you to speak with a therapist or other helping professional to help manage your trauma response. Not only will you learn skills to regulate and effective ways to cope in times of high stress, but you will also be modeling to your child that it's okay to ask for help and prioritize their mental health.

2 Create a safe space to talk to your child:

Focus on trying to create rituals of connections to provide times to talk. Children and teens may feel uncomfortable with deep talk times because vulnerable feelings will stir up traumatic emotions. Creating rituals tied to being together might feel easier for your child. Rituals could look like daily walks, family meals, rides in the car, and general playtime. Be available but don't push too hard to make them talk about their feelings. Additionally, it may be beneficial to seek professional help from a mental health professional to learn the skills to help create a safe and supportive environment that enables your child to talk about feelings.

3 Things to say to your child or teen:

Oftentimes the best thing that we can do for our child is listen and be open to hearing their experiences and allowing them to vent. We can ask open-ended questions such as:
"How are you feeling today?"
"Are you feeling safe?"
"What can we work on to help you feel as safe as possible?"
"Is there anything specific that you feel I can do to support you during this time?"

Here are some things your child needs to hear from you right now:

- "I am so sorry that you experienced such a traumatic event."
- "I am here for you and want to do whatever I can to help you through this difficult time."
- "It's okay to feel scared and overwhelmed right now, and I understand that."
- "I want you to know that I'm here to talk whenever you need me, and I will always be here to listen."
- "You can contact your school counselors, teachers, and friends for help if you need to."
- "Above all, I want you to know I love you and am here for you."
- "It's okay if you don't feel back to normal soon; it can take a while for the brain to heal."
- "That must have been so scary for you. It can take time to feel safe again."

4 Things that would not be helpful to say to your child or teen:

“You are in your room too much.”
Instead, invite them to do something with you and express your interest in doing something with them. Don’t talk about their trauma response unless they bring it up, and create a scale that allows you to ask how they’re doing without intruding, such as, "how are you doing today on a scale of 1-10?"

“If you just _____ (slept more, were on your phone less, prayed more, kept busy, worked more or less, etc.) then you wouldn’t feel so bad.”
Like adults, kids and teens want to be validated and heard and are not always looking for solutions. Stay out of “problem solver” mode and listen to and validate what your child is willing to share.

“You’re just feeling_____right now. You will get over it; we all feel like that sometimes.”
Our environment and biology can trigger trauma reactions. It is essential to recognize trauma-triggered states in teens and children and not minimize it. Ignoring signs of trauma reactions can lead them to shut down, engage in unhealthy coping skills like self-harm, addictions, and even suicidal thoughts, plans, or attempts.

“Calm down, it’s not a big deal,” or “It’ll be better by tomorrow.”
These kinds of statements invalidate what they are feeling and imply that they have control over their stress/anxiety or reaction to the event or that they should be “over” their bad feelings quicker than they are. Healing after a traumatic event has no timeline, and implying there should be could make your teen or child feel shame.

“Well, nothing actually happened, so you should/shouldn't feel_____.”
At the moment, the threat was genuine, and the brain and body responded as such. We must validate and give time for healing after an event where your child’s safety is in question.

5 When to get a professional involved:

For additional help, many support groups are available online to help those parents affected by school shootings. Taking care of yourself as a parent during this time is also essential. Make sure you take time for yourself to create rituals of connecting with people who are supportive and validating, and seek care of your mental health. Your child cannot handle your anxiety or feelings during this time, so you must discuss it with other adults or trained professionals. Your child needs you to be their caregiver during this time, and if you find that you or your child are having trouble processing what happened, it is a good idea to reach out to a professional in your area for counseling services.

For additional information and resources, feel free to visit our website: www.wellspringssolutions.com