

Helping kids cope with tragedies

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News of terrorist events and shootings often cause us all to be concerned and alarmed. We may feel more vulnerable than before, and sometimes it's hard to know which threats to take seriously and how best to protect ourselves. Children experience many of the same feelings as adults — sometimes to an even greater degree. Their dependence on adults and limited experience with danger can make news of threats and attacks especially terrifying for them. How can we reassure them in times of increased anxiety? Here are some tips for helping children cope with news of mass shooting and terrorist events:

Limit exposure

There has been a dramatic change in how (and how often) the news is reported. A sensationalistic, 24-hour news cycle is pervasive in our society, such that we (and our children) can be subjected to constant news of violence. Using the child's age and maturity level as a guide, parents and other caretakers can be intentional about how information about world events is conveyed to their children.

Here is a guideline:

Ages 0-6:— No news is good news. Children below the age of 7 not only have trouble understanding much of what is in the news but also have difficulty putting the information into perspective because of their limited experience with the outside world. If a terrorist is on the loose, many 5- and 6-year-olds will be sure he's coming after them. It will likely be difficult to shield children from news of national events such as terrorist attacks, but even information about such widely reported news stories should come through a trusted adult who can help them understand, using age-appropriate language, what everyone is talking about.

Ages 7-12:— Parental guidance suggested. If children this age are in the room (or car) when the news is on, parents should be especially vigilant for stories that are too graphic for their young ears. They might understand more than we think or interpret information erroneously. Be especially careful to shield elementary-age kids from stories of crimes against children. There's no evidence that exposure to these events via the news helps to protect them from harm, and it may make them fearful.

Ages 13 and up:— Talk about it. While young children might think everything will happen to them, teens often have the opposite problem. Their belief in their own invincibility can sometimes be tempered by healthy exposure to news about others their age, and it's important for teens to be knowledgeable about current events at a time when you still have the opportunity to give them your take on what's going on in the world.

Reassure children

Let children know that such violent events are rare, and that you are working to keep them safe. Unfortunately, we can't promise our children that a terrorist attack will never hit close to home, but we can reassure them that while the news might make them feel like these events happen all the time, they are actually very rare. In my own psychology practice, I often help children understand how rare these attacks are by asking them if anyone they know — at home, school or church — has ever been the victim of a terrorist attack. Generally, they answer "no," to which I respond, "If it's never happened to anyone we know, it can't be that common, right?" Let children know that you are always working to keep yourself, and them, safe. Tell them you know what to watch for when you are in large gatherings and public places, and that's one reason why you want them to stay close by, where you can see them.

Watch for anxiety

There has been a dramatic rise in the diagnosis of anxiety disorders in children in recent years, and news exposure may be one of the contributing factors. If your child expresses extreme and atypical fears about separating from you, frequent nightmares or physical symptoms of stress, like headaches, stomachaches and difficulty sleeping, it may be advisable to speak with a child psychologist or counselor about working on coping skills you or the counselor could teach your child to better manage his or her anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, which involves identifying and changing habits of anxious thoughts as well as learning new behaviors for controlling anxiety, has been shown to be especially effective.

Be peacemakers

Christ calls each of us to follow his example, loving others as he has loved us. This begins in our own homes. Prompt children to look for ways they can help others at home, at school and in the community. Teach them how to be accepting of differences and find common ground. Coach them through conflicts with siblings and peers so they can learn effective ways to solve problems and get along with others. Sometimes children (and adults) ask why God allows terrorist attacks and other tragedies. While this is difficult to understand, one thing we can know is that God is always near to people who are suffering. We believe in a God who suffers with us and helps us through even the most difficult of times. We also see his presence in all of the helpers who respond to such attacks and tragedies. Terrorist attacks and mass shootings are vivid examples of the worst in humankind, but our response to them can often bring out the best in us. We must never become callous or desensitized to acts of violence in our world, but instead we should ask ourselves, "How can we help?"

Let us not let terrorism keep us from living our lives with confidence, joy and hope. One of the most commonly repeated sayings in Scripture is, "Do not be afraid." Instead, let's turn to God and work together with him to build a world where all can live in safety and peace.

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