

Tips and Thoughts for Parents

First and foremost, our youth will only recover as well as the adults around them. That makes self-care really important! It also means that our attitudes are examples for them; so be aware of how you talk about others and about the situation around the youth.

When students survive a school shooting, they have a range of reactions. There is no one "normal" reaction. Too, those reactions and emotions will change and fluctuate over time. Some students will seem fine at first and have more difficulty later. Examples include:

- Difficulty sleeping, wanting to sleep close to an adult, wanting to leave a light on
 - Give them the extra nurturing for a while. Let them sleep where they feel safe.
- Difficulty waking up or staying awake during the day
 - Often this is because they're sleeping so poorly at night.
- Difficulty separating from parents
 - This can be because they sense that you don't want to let them out of your sight. That is totally understandable! Reassure them that you'll all work through this.
- Regressive behaviors or avoiding work, homework, chores
 - Their sense of the fearlessness and bravado has been assaulted. Be understanding.
- Aggressive behaviors or anger
 - Feeling aggressive or angry can be a cover for feeling overwhelmed, or can be an attempt to feel a sense of control. Remind them that their feelings are valid, but that they are still responsible for their actions. Physical activity can help "run off" some of the built-up adrenaline from the event. That doesn't go away quickly, and adrenaline in our system makes us irritable, on edge and easily provoked.
- Anxiety about returning to school
 - Sometimes parents want to protect their kids and give them extra time before coming back to school, but when that happens, that student doesn't get all of the special support and the opportunity to participate in "taking back the school" and making it their own again. Encourage them to go to school, and let them know they can call you during the day. Ask them what they could wear or take in their pocket to remind them how much you'll be thinking of them all day. Ask them to name two or three people at school that they can trust or talk to if they're feeling shaky.
- Desires or thoughts of revenge, retaliation, retribution
 - Lead by example. Listen to how you talk with them about others. Recognize that we will have safe schools when we have safe communities and a cultural climate of respect. Be very clear with your child about all the reasons that revenge contributes to more of what you've just been through. Be clear and direct about your expectations that they'll be responsible in their behavior.

Difficult conversations: Often we think that, if our kids don't bring it up, maybe it isn't bothering them. Often they think that, if we don't bring it up, we think they should be able to handle it on their own, or that we aren't able to or "up to" the conversation. Helpful ways to check in with your child:

- Make an observation or state a thought. "I've been thinking about what it will be like for kids to go back to school." Then ask, "What have you heard kids saying about that?" If we ask, "What will that be like for you," it is easy for kids to feel like they should put on a brave front for us. But if you're asking about "other" kids, your child is apt to feel less defensive because they can be talking about anybody's feelings.
- Resist the temptation to allay their fears right away. Instead, "Tell me more about that." Often they initially just state a part of their concern. It will help them more to put their own words to their deepest fear than to have us rush in with our solutions.
- "What ideas do you have about what could make a difference?" Often adults think



they know what will help most, when actually if we listen, kids give us answers that will work for them! And that's the goal, after all!

- Ask what they'd like you to do that would be supportive or helpful. That doesn't mean you have to do it, but if you can't, give them an explanation about that.
- Avoid asking "Why?" That question often makes people (especially kids) defensive. We need to be able to talk about how we feel without having to defend it, and there are always questions that give us better information. "When did you first realize that?" "Tell me more about that." "Have you heard other kids say the same thing?" Find a question you can ask that will make it easy for them to tell you more. Other options for statements: ... I've been thinking about how this has changed our world... what kids might need from parents right now.... what worries kids...

Things you can do:

1. Turn off the TV. Media coverage is engraining the trauma more deeply into everyone's brains. Talk to one another. Find something to do together. Especially shield younger children from graphic and repeated coverage.
2. Maintain routine
3. Continue to lovingly hold to expectations and discipline. More than ever, they need to feel like there are boundaries and limits in their world.
4. Provide physical and emotional comfort in all the ways you can
5. **Have fun when you can!** Plan something special. Have some treats.
6. Gather kids together where adults can be a loving and comforting presence
7. Don't hide your tears, but don't use your child as your support. Find adult support!
8. Encourage them to engage in the activities the school will have for them
9. Avoid giving advice. That often feels more disempowering for them. Instead, ask questions that help them figure out their own answers, and support what might work.
10. Keep an eye out over coming months. Often trauma doesn't manifest until the next crisis, whatever that might be, which can be different for different kids. For some, it will be nothing to do with school. Could be a particular scene in a movie.

When to be concerned: Traumatic events can bring psychological challenges that can impact their lives for a long time or forever. There is much we can do to prevent long-term symptoms if we find help quickly. The longer youth have these symptoms, the more difficult it is for them to get better. If your child has these symptoms for more than ten days or two weeks, seek help from someone who is specifically trained in youth and trauma.

- Flashbacks; feeling like it is happening again or seeing images from the shooting that are vivid. These are accompanied by anxiety and rapid heart rate.
- Triggers: noises or places that make them re-experience the event or cause anxiety
- Nightmares: These should be less and less frequent over time.

Things to report to the school, to your mental health resource or to law enforcement:

- Anything you realize will help the school best support students returning to school
- Anything you hear about your child or any child who may be feeling suicidal
- Anything you hear about planned revenge or retaliation

Things that help everyone:

- Get enough sleep, eat as healthy as you can, get exercise
- Doing those things that bring hope – prayer, family gathering together...
- Diversion is terrific part of the time. Go someplace new.
- The greatest help for anxiety and trauma is deep relaxation that includes breathing deep in the belly. This actually activates biochemistry in the body that lowers blood pressure, lowers anxiety, calms the brain and promotes relaxation.

