

SUPPORTING YOURSELF, EACH OTHER AND YOUR CHILDREN/TEENS AFTER A MASS SHOOTING

Today's mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada will evoke many emotions for you and your children/teens -- sadness, grief, helplessness, anxiety, and anger.

Children's and teen's reactions to the shooting are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers respond to the event. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common after mass violence. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your children/teens.

WHERE TO BEGIN

You must start with yourself -- before you can be of help to others you need to make sure you are OK. The metaphor we use is the instruction from flight attendants to put our own oxygen mask on first before we try and put masks on others. It makes sense, if you try to put on an oxygen mask on someone else first, you could lose consciousness and be unable to assist others.

THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF

- **Take care of yourself. Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep and exercise.**
- **Help each other. Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or support each other.**
- **Give yourself permission to limit media input, you don't need to be saturated by the 24/7 news.**
- **Put off major decisions. Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.**
- **Give yourself a break. Take time to rest and do things that you like to do.**

BE A POSITIVE ROLE MODEL

- You can share your feelings about the events with your child/teen, but at a level they can understand. You may express sadness and empathy for the victims and their families. You may share some worry, but it is important to also share ideas for coping with difficult situations like this tragedy. When you speak of the quick response by law enforcement and medical personnel to help the victims (and the heroic or generous efforts of ordinary citizens), you help your child/teen see that there can be good, even in the midst of such a horrific event.

COMMON REACTIONS FROM CHILDREN/TEENS

- **Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others**
- **Fears that another shooting may occur**
- **Changes in behavior:**
 - Increase in activity level
 - Decrease in concentration and attention
 - Increase in irritability and anger
 - Sadness, grief, and/or withdrawal
 - Radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future
 - Increases or decreases in sleep and appetite
 - Engaging in harmful habits like drinking, using drugs, or doing things that are harmful to self or others
 - Lack of interest in usual activities, including how they spend time with friends
- **Physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches, aches and pains)**
- **Changes in school and work-related habits and behavior with peers and family**



- **Staying focused on the shooting (talking repeatedly about it)**
- **Strong reactions to reminders of the shooting (media images, smoke, police, memorials)**
- **Increased sensitivity to sounds (loud noises, screaming)**

THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR CHILDREN/TEENS

- **Start the conversation.** Talk about the shooting with your child/teen. Not talking about it can make the event even more threatening in their mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible even to speak about or that you do not know what has happened. With social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, text messages, newsbreaks on favorite radio and TV stations, and others), it is highly unlikely that children and teenagers have not heard about this. Chances are your child/teen has heard about it, too.
- **Find time to have these conversations.** Use time such as when you eat together or sit together in the evening to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Try not to have these conversations close to bedtime, as this is the time for rest and it is more likely to lead to nightmares.
- **What does your child/teen already know?** Start by asking what your child/teen already has heard about the events from the media and from friends. Listen carefully; try to figure out what they know or believe. As your child/teen explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions, and underlying fears or concerns. Understand that this information will change as more facts about the shooting are known.
- **Gently correct inaccurate information.** If your child/teen has inaccurate information or misconceptions, take time to provide the correct information in simple, clear, age- appropriate language.
- **Encourage your child/teen to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.** Your child/teen may have some difficult questions about the incident. For example, they may ask if it is possible that it could happen to you or them; they are probably really asking whether it is “likely.” The concern about re-occurrence will be an issue for caregivers and children/teens alike. While it is important to discuss the likelihood of this risk, **they are also asking if they are safe.** This may be a time to review plans your family has for keeping safe in the event of any crisis situation. Do give any information you have on the help and support the victims and their families are receiving which gives you an opportunity to highlight the goodness of people. Like adults, children/teens are better able to cope with a difficult situation when they have the facts about it. Having question-and-answer talks gives your child/teen ongoing support as he or she begins to cope with the range of emotions stirred up by this tragedy.
- **Promote your children’s/teen’s self-care.** Help children/teens by encouraging them to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest and exercise. Let them know it is OK to take a break from talking with others about the recent attack or from participating in any of the memorial events.
- **Help children/teens feel safe.** Talk with them about their concerns over safety and discuss changes that are occurring in the country/community to promote safety. Encourage your child/teen to voice their concerns to you or to teachers at school.
- **Maintain expectations or “rules.”** Stick with family rules, such as curfews, checking in with you while with friends, and keeping up with homework and chores. On a time-limited basis, keep a closer watch on where teens are going and what they are planning to do to monitor how they are doing. Assure them that the extra check-in is temporary, just until things stabilize.



- **They may become more irritable or defiant.** Children and even teens may have trouble separating from caregivers, wanting to stay at home or close by them. It's common for young people to feel anxious about what has happened, what may happen in the future, and how it will impact their lives. Children/Teens may think about this event, even when they try not to. Their sleep and appetite routines may change. Be patient and understanding, in general, you should see these reactions lessen within a few weeks.
- **Limit media exposure.** Especially limit your younger child's exposure to media images and sounds of the shooting, and do not allow your very young children to see or hear **any** TV/radio shooting-related messages. Even if they appear to be engrossed in play, children often are aware of what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to an adult may be very upsetting and confusing for a child. Limit your own exposure as well. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage of this shooting.
- **Be patient.** In times of stress, children/teens may have trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. While they may not openly ask for your guidance or support, they will want it. Adolescents who are seeking increased independence may have difficulty expressing their needs. Both children and teens will need a little extra patience, care, and love. (Be patient with yourself, too!).
- **Monitor changes in relationships.** Explain to children/teens that strains on relationships are expectable. Emphasize that everyone needs family and friends for support during this time. Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Encourage tolerance for how your family and friends may be recovering or feeling differently. Accept responsibility for your own feelings, by saying "I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I was having a bad day."
- **Address radical changes in attitudes and expectations for the future.** Explain to children/teens that changes in people's attitudes are common and tend to be temporary after a tragedy like this. These feelings can include feeling scared, angry, and sometimes revengeful. Find other ways to make them feel more in control and talk about their feelings.
- **Identify constructive activities.** Children and teens are often deeply concerned for survivors and families of survivors, wanting to help. Encourage age appropriate activities that are meaningful (collecting money, supplies, etc) as long as it appears helpful and not burdensome.
- **Extra help.** Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children's/teens' abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma. Contact your family physician, pediatrician, or state mental health associations for referrals to such experts.

Tips compiled and adapted from support resources published by The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, <http://www.nctsn.org/>

