

## Responding to Traumatic Events

### VICTIM AND WITNESS REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

When an individual witnesses or is victimized by violence, they experience the symptoms of trauma. Over time, as people work through their feelings, they learn to move through the trauma and are once again able to focus on their lives and interests. For some, professional help may be needed. Shock and denial are typical and normal protective responses, especially shortly after the event. As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following are normal responses to traumatic event and often diminish over time: *(From American Psychological Association and COVA)*

- *Feelings become intense and unpredictable.* You may be irritable, moody, anxious, panicky or nervous; deep sadness and depression may occur. You may become more argumentative. Shock, disbelief; anger and a sense of numbness are common. You may feel detached and withdraw while others cling to family and friends. You may experience hyper-vigilance, exaggerated startle response, loss of sense of security and safety. You may feel like your emotions are out of control ("I'll never stop crying").
- *Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected by trauma.* You might have repeated and often unwanted vivid memories, intrusive thoughts or "flashbacks" of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat and sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions or become more easily confused. Eating and sleeping patterns may be disrupted; sleeping more or difficulty falling or staying asleep. Re-telling the story is common. You may blame yourself for the tragedy ("If only I . . .")
- *Interpersonal relationships often become strained.* Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments at work and/or home is common. You may become withdrawn and isolated and avoid or lose interest in usual activities.
- *Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress:* headache, stomachache, muscle tension, nausea may occur. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.
- *Recurring emotional reactions are common.* Anniversaries of the event, such as one month or one year, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience.

(PLEASE DO NOT LITTER)

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### HELPING CHILDREN AND TEENS COPE WITH TRAUMA

- Be direct, simple, honest and appropriate. Explain truthfully what happened. Let them know that what they are experiencing is normal and expected.
- LISTEN to what they are feeling or asking you. Respond according to their needs and your own ability.
- Encourage them to express feelings openly. Crying is normal and helpful. So are feelings of anger. Accept the emotions and reactions the child or teen expresses; do not try to talk them out of how they are feeling. Sleep disturbances are most common. Some may revert to behaviors from an earlier age; allow it. Examples are: sleeping with the light on, wanting to be held, sucking their thumb, and wetting the bed.
- Share your feelings with the child or teen. Allow the child or teen to comfort you. Offer warmth and your physical presence and affections.
- Be patient. Know that it is common to re-tell and/or hear "the story" and to ask the same questions again and again.
- Reassure them that the loss is not contagious; that the death of one person does not mean that another loved one will also die or be injured.
- Maintain order, stability and security in the child or teen's life. Encourage time with their friends and support systems.
- Take your own advice. Take care of yourself. If you're not okay, the child or teen cannot be okay.
- Seek professional help when necessary.

### HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY?

- Give yourself time to adjust, including mourning. Communicate your experience by talking, drawing, writing, dancing...
- Engage in healthy behaviors: meals, exercise, rest. Establish or reestablish routines.
- Avoid making major life decisions.
- Ask for support from others. This may include professional help. To talk with someone call: Denver Center for Crime Victims (DCCV) at: 303-894-8000 or Metro Crisis Services: 888-885-1222 both are FREE, 24 hour hotlines. For more information on trauma go to Victim Service Network:  
[victimservicesnetwork.org](http://victimservicesnetwork.org)

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