

Talking to Teens

When Difficult Things Happen



CENTER FOR
RESILIENCE + WELL-BEING

When difficult things happen in the world, teens look to their peers and the adults that surround them to help them feel safe and understand what is happening. This can feel challenging for adults because they are also responding to and making sense of the same experience. There can be a range of intense reactions including horror, shock, anger, fear, loss and grief. Teens might react differently than adults. It makes sense that people in different stages of life will experience this differently. This resource offers guidance for adults to help them talk with teens.

FIRST, CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Before talking with your teen, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during the conversation. Just as teens have feelings about these experiences, so do adults. You might feel scared, worried, overwhelmed, angry, helpless, sad, distracted, scattered, or numb. These feelings in adults and teens are completely normal following a violent event. Consider how any single event may call up past feelings of fear, anger, or grief and may intersect with stress and trauma related to one's identity (gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+) or previous experience. In addition, this event may be layered on top of other current stressors in your work or home life.

 A helpful first step may be to acknowledge the feelings you are having.

The simple act of labeling emotions promotes a sense of calm. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. You can also take a few deep breaths, a short walk, talk to a friend, or do anything that helps you feel calm or more grounded. This will help prepare you to talk with your teen in a way that communicates safety and openness to talking about their feelings, experience and perspectives. Checking in with yourself first will also help you to be ready to address any questions they might have. It's okay not to have all the answers.

 Your warm, open presence is the most important thing.

CLARIFY YOUR GOAL

As you approach the conversation, it can be helpful to start with a goal in mind. An overall goal is to create a safe space for teens to share their feelings, questions, reactions, and perspective about what happened. You might ask yourself, "How might I learn more about their perspective, experience? How might I help them feel empowered in ways that are important to them (e.g., service, activism, school/community involvement)? How might I show I am open and ready to listen? Some simple goals are: to be present, listen, be open, show interest and support, and clarify information.

 Keep coming back to messages of support and willingness to keep talking.

PROVIDE INFORMATION AND OPTIONS

Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how the community responded. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of the teen. Ask open-ended questions about what they have already heard and correct any misinformation. If a teen asks about how they can help or take action, share information about opportunities in their community. Be simple and clear. Multiple short conversations are more powerful than a single long conversation.

 Remember to share clear information including things your teen might be able to do in response to the event and keep checking in.

REFLECT

Reflection involves simply repeating back the teen's words verbatim or summarizing what they said. Reflection lets teens know you are listening and tracking what they are sharing. When you reflect, it is important to use their own words as much as possible.

 Reflection communicates that you are listening and what they are saying is important.



ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS



Ask helpful questions to learn more about your teen's thoughts, feelings, perspective, and needs. The questions we ask should be open-ended and focused on understanding their experience, emotion, perspective, and needs instead of fact-finding. ("What was that like for you?," "How are you feeling?," "What are you thinking/wondering about?," Do you have any questions or worries?" "How can I help?"). Less is more when it comes to questions. Teens may only may only be interested in answering 1-2 questions at a time – it's okay to circle back or wait for natural opportunities.

-  Helpful questions encourage open sharing and help you learn more about your teen's feelings and needs.



GO SLOW, PAUSE, AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE

You may find that both you and your teen need a little extra time to respond after questions. This is valuable time for processing emotions and coordinating thinking, especially as it relates to complex emotional situations. Make sure your body language conveys patience, openness and care.

-  When you pause and allow time, you communicate "I have time for you," and "You are important".



LABEL EMOTIONS

Just as it is helpful for us as adults to label emotions, it is also helpful for teens to label how they are feeling. Sometimes they need support to do this. You can help them to label emotions by reflecting back any feeling words they say, naming feelings you notice, and taking a guess at what they might be feeling. When you do this, check in with your teen to see if you got it right. Don't be thrown off guard if teens describe feeling numb or feeling nothing. Reflect back and ask what that is like for them.

-  Labeling emotions supports emotion awareness and regulation.



VALIDATE AND NORMALIZE

Step into their shoes and let the your teen know that you understand what they are feeling and it makes sense to feel or think that way. You might say, "That makes sense," "I get it," "I understand," "Other people feel that way, too," and "You are not alone". Don't be thrown off if a teen says "You don't/can't understand" or "There is NO way you understand what I am going through". It is normal at this time of development for teens to express their uniqueness and separateness from adult experience. Validate and normalize it makes sense to have a different experience.

-  Validating and normalizing helps teens feel understood and to keep trusting their own perspectives and feelings.



MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE

Be aware of how much you and your teen are accessing social media in the aftermath of the event. Social media is a part of our culture and often the main way teens choose to connect to one another. Talk with your teen about balancing their use of social media and about the importance of having face to face conversations. Check in about their media sources so they have reliable, high quality information.

-  Help your teen understand the importance of balancing maintaining connection with friends and family via social media.

For More Resources, Visit our Website:

<https://ibsweb.colorado.edu/crw/>

Email: crw@colorado.edu

[Additional NCTSN Resource](#)