

Helping Kids to Cope with Trauma and Loss Reminders After a School Shooting: A Guide for Caregivers

Julie B. Kaplow, Ph.D., A.B.P.P.

The Trauma and Grief Center at Texas Children's Hospital

The weeks and months following a school shooting can be extremely distressing to children, adolescents and their families, especially to those who have been directly exposed. After this type of trauma, it is common for kids to have fears related to being separated from caregivers or even being hurt or killed. Over time, most youth will adjust to their "new normal" and go on to lead healthy, happy lives. But it is important for adults to be aware of possible "trauma or loss reminders" that kids may face, so that caregivers can be prepared to help them.

What Are Trauma Reminders?

Trauma reminders are people, places, things, or situations that remind the child or adolescent of the traumatic event. In the case of a shooting, these can include loud noises (e.g., fireworks), screaming, doors slamming, sounds of sirens, and even people who were there at the time of the shooting. These trauma reminders are important to be aware of, especially given how common they are during 4th of July celebrations. When kids face trauma reminders, they are more likely to experience traumatic stress reactions, including increased heart rate, trembling, shaking, intense fear, crying/sobbing, and in some more serious cases, dissociation (feeling like they are in another world or frozen). If a child is experiencing any of these reactions, caregivers can do the following to help the child to cope:

1. **Explain what is happening and why they might be reacting this way.** Kids may be confused about the reaction they're having, so explaining what is happening can be reassuring. *"I know the sound of the fireworks is scary because it reminds you of the sounds you heard during the shooting. It's normal to feel scared when you're reminded of that, but remember that you are out of that situation now and you're perfectly safe."*
2. **Keep the lines of communication open.** Although your child may not want to talk about what they're thinking or feeling in that moment, keeping an open door policy is important. That will make it more likely for them to turn to you when they do feel more comfortable talking about it. *"I know it's hard to talk about this right now. I just want you to know that I'm here for you whenever you need me."*
3. **Encourage healthy coping skills.** These can include deep breathing exercises or grounding exercises (e.g., feeling their feet firmly planted on the floor) that can help them to calm down. When kids are faced with trauma reminders, it can also be helpful to call upon the healthy coping skills that they may already be using in everyday situations. *"I know you like to listen to music when you're feeling stressed. Is that something you might want to do right now?"* Or *"Getting exercise usually takes your mind off of stressful things. Would you want to go for a walk?"*

4. **Encourage social support.** After an event like a school shooting, it is often helpful for kids to be around others who have had the same experience. This allows them to express concerns that they may have, which may be more difficult to discuss with others who weren't in the same situation. It also helps to normalize many of the reactions they may be having to trauma reminders.

What are Loss Reminders?

Loss reminders are people, places, things, or situations that remind the child of the physical absence of the person who died. These can include the person's favorite places, people who resemble the person who died, things they used to do together, etc. When kids face loss reminders, they are likely to experience feelings of sadness, yearning and longing to be back with the person who died, and wishing they could see them again. If a child is experiencing any of these reactions, caregivers can do the following to help the child to cope:

1. **Meet the child where they are at:** Bereaved kids can express a wide range of reactions in response to loss reminders. Some want to talk a lot about the death, and others may not want to talk at all. It can be helpful for caregivers to 1) answer your child's questions about the death *when they are ready*; 2) validate their concerns and emotions; and 3) be fully present when they need you. For example, you might say, *"I didn't know you were feeling this way. I'm happy you felt comfortable sharing that with me, and I'm so proud that you did."* Or *"I know how difficult this experience has been for you, and I promise to do my best to be there for you."*
2. **Provide opportunities to memorialize and connect to the deceased:** Sharing stories about the deceased, looking at pictures, or doing an activity to honor their memory, are wonderful ways for your child to express their feelings and feel connected to the person who died. For example, you might say: *"Is there anything you would like to do on (the day _____ died/ their birthday/special holidays?) to help remember them?"*
3. **Take care of yourself:** Parents are often so worried about caring for their children after a death that they forget to care for themselves. As a parent or other caregiver, you are an instrumental part of helping your child to grieve in adaptive ways. Getting the care you may need is just as critical as caring for your child. It not only will help to ensure that you will be ready and able to help your child, but also is an opportunity for you to model good self-care—including asking for help if you need it.

As we approach the 4th of July holiday, recognizing and helping kids to prepare for potential trauma and loss reminders can be helpful in reducing their distress. For further information or resources about how to help youth to cope in the aftermath of a trauma, please visit Texas Children's Trauma and Grief Center website:

<https://www.texaschildrens.org/departments/trauma-and-grief-center/resources>

Elements of this handout also draw from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-guidelines-helping-youth-after-recent-shooting>