



SUPPORTING SURVIVORS OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

An Introduction to Trauma and Peer Support

Six months after the theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado that claimed the lives of 12 people and injured 58, the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut again stunned the nation as 26 lives were taken, including 20 children. We are all deeply saddened by these tragic events, but the most intense trauma caused by these violent acts is ultimately borne by the survivors and their communities.

Recovering from Trauma

“We don’t heal in isolation,
but in community.”

S. Kelley Harrell

For the children of Sandy Hook, their parents, and all those affected by the recent shooting, addressing their trauma is an important part of the healing process. Social support is crucial in providing the emotional and practical assistance that survivors need to return to their normal lives. Children in elementary school will most likely look towards their parents for guidance and support.

The [APA provides the following guidelines](#) for parents that are trying to help their children manage distress after a shooting: 1) Talk with your child, 2) Keep home a safe place, 3) Watch for signs of stress, fear, or anxiety, 4) Limit media exposure, and 5) Take care of yourself. Additionally, the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) may be a helpful resource to learn more about child traumatic stress.

The following video clips are recommended for parents and teachers that are supporting children after traumatic events.

Video Resources

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tLpzn18Jf8>
Trauma, Brain and Relationship: Helping Children Heal
Section Three: The Many Faces of Trauma

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htjn117L9U0>
Trauma, Brain and Relationship: Helping Children Heal
Section Five: Healing Trauma

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYj7YYHmbQs>
Trauma, Brain and Relationship: Helping Children Heal
Section Six: You Make the Difference

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib_H0yyFbYc
Healing Stress and Trauma: Safety, Boundaries

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otHoyK5vRPo>
Healing Stress and Trauma: Community at School

Social support will look different for older siblings and parents of Sandy Hook students. Among adolescents, peer support is [emerging as an important protective factor](#) against PTSD in the wake of traumatic events. In this developmental stage, adolescents may rely on peers rather than family to decrease isolation and cope with stress. For adult survivors, the [APA offers helpful tips](#) on managing traumatic stress. This guide emphasizes the importance of communication, asking for support, and seeking out peer support groups. [SAMHSA offers the most comprehensive listing of resources](#) for coping with violence and traumatic events.

Tips for Providing Psychological First Aid

In times of need, family, friends, and neighbors are usually the first ones to offer help. However, in unfamiliar circumstances, it may not be immediately clear how to best assist survivors following a traumatic event. The County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Program offers this helpful document on [Psychological First Aid for The Community Helping Each Other](#) based on the three concepts of "Listen, Protect, and Connect."

Trauma Intervention Programs, Inc. gives the following advice on [how to help the emotionally injured after tragedy strikes](#):

In the first few hours after a tragic event, the survivor is often surrounded by people who have "a job to do." The primary goal of the person providing emotional first aid is to enable the survivor to act according to his/her wishes, values, and beliefs and not according to what others think should be done.

Do not "over care" or do too much for the survivor. Remember that the primary psychological challenge for the survivor is to regain a sense of control. Therefore, the survivor should be encouraged to make decisions and take action in his/her own behalf.

Finally, a broken heart cannot "be fixed." Don't try! A caring presence is what you can offer to someone who is emotionally devastated. Just being there is very powerful and will be experienced by the survivor as very helpful.

Although friends and neighbors can provide valuable emotional first aid and support, [mental health professionals caution](#) that trying to be helpful can sometimes inadvertently exacerbate distress. In particular, it is important that peers not try to fix a problem or feel responsible to provide "the answer." As with all peer support, we cannot fix anything. But when we are trying to help people who have suffered terrible trauma, that natural human tendency to want to "make them better" may be very hard to resist. We need to stick to basic principles — accepting people as we find them, providing the opportunity to talk out feelings, even those that may be hard for us to hear, encouraging their individual ways of coping, and providing some instrumental support if needed (e.g., preparing some meals, help finding housing or babysitting or rides to the doctor, etc.). We should only intervene in a more direct way — that is, try to "fix something" — if the

person we are concerned about seems really likely to do something extremely foolish or risky. If that's the case *and before acting*, we should try to get some advice from another friend or family member or even the family doctor if possible.

About Trauma



Trauma is [defined by the American Psychological Association](#) as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster." A traumatic event may involve a single experience or a series of events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope with the emotions elicited by that experience. In some cases, physical trauma may lead to psychological trauma, as with accidents, abuse, and sexual assault. Psychological trauma may also be caused by witnessing violence, verbal and emotional abuse, and neglect.

According to the [National Center for PTSD](#), a large proportion of youth are exposed to one or more traumatic events in their lifetimes. The [National Survey of Adolescents](#), a representative sample of 4,023 American youth aged 12 to 17, estimated that 17.4% had experienced a serious physical assault and 8.1% a sexual assault; 39.4% had witnessed one or more incidents of serious interpersonal violence. The [National Comorbidity Survey](#) found that 60.7% of American males and 51.2% of females aged 15-24 reported exposures to one or more traumatic events.

Children that experience trauma have higher risks of developing psychological, behavioral, and emotional problems such as substance abuse, depression and anxiety disorders, and PTSD. In children exposed to trauma, less than 15% of females and less than 6% of males eventually develop PTSD. [Studies on youth following natural disasters](#) have found that resilience is the most common trajectory for youth; the majority experience mild symptoms initially and symptoms decline over time.