Coping With Violence

This guide offers tips and information on coping with random acts of violence and talking to your children about violence. Note—This guide is for informational purposes only. If you are having difficulty coping with a violent incident, please contact a professional counselor or your medical provider for assistance.

Coping With Reactions to Violence

Whether you are a victim of a violence act, or frightened by the threat of violence (e.g., highly publicized sniper attacks, school violence, etc.) you may experience a variety of emotions including anxiety, stress, helplessness, fear, irritability and anger. You may also suffer from inability to concentrate, loss of appetite and nightmares. All of these reactions are normal but if you do not address them, you can jeopardize your health. If you or a family member are having difficulty coping, do not hesitate to get help. In addition, the following tips may help:

• Reach out to supportive friends and family for comfort and guidance.
• Be patient with yourself.
• Try to maintain a nutritious diet and exercise regularly (with permission of your doctor) to relieve stress and keep your energy up.
• Focus on your breathing—deep, slow breaths will help calm you.
• Talk to a crisis counselor. There are hotlines staffed by crisis counselors to help people cope with violence. In addition, the “Helpful Resources” section at the end of this guide provides information on organizations that may provide support.
• Ask your employer if they offer an EAP (Employee Assistance Program). An EAP counselor can provide counseling on a wide range of issues, including stress, anxiety, dealing with a tragedy and more.

How Children React to Acts of Violence

How children respond to violence (or threats of violence) will vary depending on the child’s age, personality and maturity level. Some children, particularly those age nine and under, may be unable to grasp the reality of violent situations. Others may be frightened that something could happen to them. Even children as young as infants and toddlers may become fussy or cry more often in response to the anxiety and stress their parents and caregivers may be experiencing.

Signs of Anxiety In Children

Children react to fear and anxiety in different ways, however there are some common reactions to watch for, including:

• Disrupted sleep patterns—frequent nightmares and/or insomnia
• Changes in eating habits
• Unusual clingingness
• Decline in school performance
• Lack of concentration
• Regression
• Increased irritability, frustration and/or aggression

Remember, these symptoms are common reactions to anxiety. However, if symptoms persist for a prolonged period of time and disrupt your child’s daily routine, seek help from a pediatrician, psychologist or social worker. A professional can help your child deal with his or her emotions and can provide valuable tips and guidance to parents.
Talking to Your Child About Violence

Regardless of how your child responds, if your child is aware of a potentially dangerous situation or an act of violence, he or she will be looking to you for answers, guidance and support. Speak to your child openly and honestly, adapting your conversations to the age of your child. Children deserve honest answers, regardless of their age. You do not have to provide every detail, but don’t hold back too much information either; instill trust in your child while helping him or her understand what happened. In addition, the following tips may help:

- Encourage your child to express his or her feelings. Children usually feel better when they can talk about their feelings. To help your child sort out his or her feelings, ask specific questions such as, “How do you feel? Does it make you feel scared? What worries you the most?” Encourage your child to be honest and open, and listen carefully for clues about hidden feelings or worries.

- Reassure your child. Respond to your child’s feelings; acknowledge his or her fears; and continually reassure your child that he or she is safe. Stress that violent incidents are rare, but avoid making false promises such as, “Nothing bad will ever happen to you.” Instead, offer your love, support and guidance and say things such as, “I am here to protect you and to help keep you safe.” In addition, remind your child that the police are also looking out for his or her safety.

- Monitor the media. Monitor and limit the amount of television your child watches. If your child sees disturbing footage of violence, his or her fears and anxieties may escalate.

- Speak to your child’s teachers and school administrators. Ask your child’s teachers and/or school principal how they have addressed violence. Many schools speak to students about safety issues, and reassure them that they are doing everything possible to keep the children safe.

If someone you know died as a result of violence, you may need additional help coping. For more information, please see these other Guides in the LifeCare® education series:

- Grief and Bereavement
- Helping Others Cope With Grief
- Helping Children Cope With Grief

- Pay close attention to your child. If your child was involved or a witness to an incident of violence, pay close attention to your child’s behavior. If you notice any unusual behavior, it may be a reaction to stress, fear or trauma. Learn how to recognize warning signs (as described in the previous section) and seek professional help from a counselor, social worker, psychologist or other professional if necessary.

Helpful Resources

The National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC)
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 480
Washington, DC 20036
800-FYI-CALL (395-2255)
202-467-8700
www.ncvc.org

This national nonprofit organization offers resources and advocacy for victims of crime and their families.

The National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC)
2345 Crystal Drive Suite 500
Arlington, VA 22202
202-466-6272
www.ncpc.org

This national nonprofit organization provides information on effective crime prevention practices for individuals and organizations and publishes educational materials on preventing crime.
Family Violence Prevention Fund
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304
San Francisco, CA 94103
415-252-8900
http://endabuse.org

This organization provides educational materials, advocacy and information to prevent violence within the home and in the community, and to help those whose lives are devastated by violence.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
www.cdc.gov/InjuryViolenceSafety

This federal agency offers information for the public about injury, violence and safety.