

A Balanced Living Special Edition Newsletter

Coping With Inexplicable Violence



The recent act of random violence in Roseburg, Oregon is overwhelming to this community. While it may not affect you directly, we recognize that you may have questions that need to be answered.

This special edition of our monthly newsletter is devoted to helping people understand how to cope with news that reports violence within our communities. These resources focus on helping people recover from violent incidents, find ways to support those who have been affected by violence,

and provide suggestions for small changes that can have a big impact on how we keep ourselves safe on a daily basis.

Take a moment and explore the articles prepared for this special edition. Share them with your loved ones, friends, or anyone that may be unsettled by these recent events.

While no one can absolutely predict when a violent incident will take place, we can prepare ourselves to respond with understanding and support. We can reach out to those who have suffered and help guide them away from their pain.

If you are an employee or eligible dependent of an organization contracting with CONCERN: EAP and need additional assistance, you can request counseling and work/life services by phoning (800) 344-4222, answered live 24/7. Other options for support are identified at the end of this newsletter.

Trauma and the Family

Because reactions to trauma can change how a trauma survivor feels and acts, traumatic experiences that happen to one member of a family can affect everyone else in the family. When trauma reactions are severe and go on for some time without treatment, they can cause major problems in a family. This fact sheet will describe family members' reactions to the traumatic event and to the survivor's symptoms and behaviors.

It's no wonder that family members react to the fact that their loved one has gone through a trauma. It's upsetting when someone you care about goes through a terrible ordeal. And it's no wonder that people react to the way a traumatized family member feels and acts. Trauma symptoms can make a family member hard to get along with or cause him or her to withdraw from the rest of the family. It can be very difficult for everyone when these changes occur. Just as people have different reactions to traumatic experiences, families also react differently when a loved one is traumatized. In the section below, many different types of reactions are described. A family may experience many of these reactions, or only a few. All of the reactions described, however, are common in families who have had to deal with trauma.

Sympathy

One of the first reactions many family members have is sympathy for their loved one. People feel very sorry that someone they care about has had to suffer through a terrifying experience. And they feel sorry when the person continues to suffer from trauma responses. It can be helpful for the person who has experienced the trauma to know that his or her family members sympathize with him or her, especially just after the traumatic event occurs.

Sympathy from family members can have a negative effect, though. When family members' sympathy leads them to "baby" a trauma survivor and have low expectations of him or her, it may send a message that the family doesn't believe the trauma survivor is strong enough to overcome the ordeal. For example, if a wife has so much sympathy for her husband that she doesn't expect him to work after a traumatic experience, the husband may think that she doesn't have any confidence in his ability to recover and go back to work.

Depression

One source of depression for family members can be the traumatic event itself. All traumas involve events where people suddenly find themselves in danger. When this happens in a situation or place where people are used to feeling safe, just knowing the event happened could cause a person to lose faith in the safety and predictability of life. For example, if a woman gets mugged in the parking lot of a neighborhood shopping center, her family may find they feel depressed by the idea that they are not really as safe as they thought they were, even in their own neighborhood.

Fear and Worry

Knowing that something terrible can happen "out of the blue" can make people very fearful. This is especially true when a family member feels unsafe and often reminds others about possible dangers. Very often, trauma survivors feel "on edge" and become preoccupied with trying to stay safe. They may want to get a guard dog, or put up security lights, or have weapons in the house in order to protect themselves and their family members. When one person in a family is very worried about safety, it can make everyone else feel unsafe too. However, something that helps one person feel safe like a loaded weapon under the bed may make another person feel unsafe.

Family members can also experience fear when the trauma survivor is angry or aggressive. As described above, trauma survivors can become angry and aggressive automatically if they feel they are in danger. Trauma survivors may also become angry and aggressive because they are frustrated that they have trauma symptoms, or because they learned to be aggressive as a way to protect themselves in the trauma situation. No matter what the reason for the anger and aggression, it naturally makes family members fearful.

Avoidance

Just as trauma survivors are often afraid to address what happened to them, family members are frequently fearful of examining the traumatic event as well. Family members may want to avoid talking about the trauma or trauma-related problems, even with friends. People who have experienced trauma hope that if they don't talk about the problem, it will go away. People also don't wish to talk about the trauma with others because they are afraid that others won't understand or will judge them.

Sometimes, if the traumatic event is one associated with shame, such as rape, family members may avoid talking about the event and its effects because of social "rules" that tell us it is inappropriate to talk about such things. Family members may also not discuss the trauma with others because they fear it will bring their loved one more shame.

Family members may avoid the things that the trauma survivor avoids because they want to spare the survivor further pain, or because they are afraid of his or her reaction. For example, the wife of a combat veteran who is anxious about going out in public may not make plans for family outings or vacations because she is afraid to upset her husband. Though she doesn't know what she can do to "fix" the problem, she does know that if the family goes to a public event, the husband will be anxious and irritable the whole time.

Guilt and Shame

Family members can feel guilt or shame after a traumatic event for a number of reasons. A family member may experience these feelings if he or she feels responsible for the trauma. For instance, a husband whose wife is assaulted may feel guilt or shame because he was unable to protect her from the attack. A wife may feel responsible for her husband's car accident if she thinks she could have prevented it if she had gotten the car's brakes fixed. A family member may feel guilt and shame if he or she feels responsible for the trauma survivor's happiness or general wellbeing, but sees no improvement no matter how hard he or she tries to help. Sometimes, after years of trauma-related problems in a family, a family member may learn about posttraumatic stress disorder and realize that this is the source of their family problems. The family member may then feel guilty that he or she was unsupportive during the years.

Anger

Anger is a very common problem in families that have survived a trauma. Family members may feel angry about the trauma and its effect on their lives. They may be angry at whomever they believe is responsible for the traumatic event (this includes being angry at God). They can also feel anger toward the trauma survivor. Family members may feel that the survivor should just "forget about it" and get on with life. They may be angry when their loved one continues to "dwell" on the trauma. A wife may be mad because her husband can't keep a job, because he drinks too much, won't go with her to social events, avoids being intimate with her, or doesn't take care of the kids. Family members may also feel angry and irritable in response to the anger and irritability the trauma survivor directs at them.

Negative Feelings

Sometimes family members have surprisingly negative feelings about the traumatized family member. They may believe the trauma survivor no longer exhibits the qualities that they loved and admired. A person who was outgoing before a trauma may become withdrawn. A person who was fun-loving and easy-going before a trauma may become ill tempered. It may be hard to feel good toward a person who seems to have changed in many ways. Family members may also respond negatively to behaviors that develop following a trauma. For instance, family members may be disgusted by a woman's overdrinking in response to a trauma.

Family members may also have negative feelings about the survivor that are directly related to the traumatic event. For example, a wife may no longer respect her husband if she feels he didn't behave bravely during a traumatic event. A husband whose wife was raped may feel disgusted about what happened and wonder if she could have done something to prevent the assault.

A son may feel ashamed that his father didn't fight back when he was beaten during a robbery. Sometimes people have these negative feelings even when they know that their assessment of the situation is unfair.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse can become a problem for the families of trauma survivors. Family members may try to escape from bad feelings by using drugs or drinking. A child or spouse may spend time drinking with friends to avoid having to go home and face an angry parent or spouse. On the other hand, spouses sometimes abuse drugs or alcohol to keep their loved ones "company" when they're drinking or using drugs to avoid trauma-related feelings.

Sleep Problems

Sleep can become a problem for family members, especially when it is a problem for the trauma survivor. When the trauma survivor stays up late to avoid going to sleep, can't get to sleep, tosses and turns in his or her sleep, or has nightmares, it is difficult for family members to sleep well. Often family members are also unable to sleep well because they are depressed and/or they are worried about the survivor.

Health Problems

Family members of trauma survivors can develop health problems for a number of reasons. Bad habits, such as drinking, smoking, and not exercising may worsen as a result of coping with a loved one's trauma responses. In addition, many illnesses can be caused by trauma-related stress if it goes on for an extended period of time. When family members constantly feel anxious, worried, angry, or depressed, they are more likely to develop stomach problems, bowel problems, headaches, muscle pain, and other health problems.

What can families do to care for themselves and the survivor? Trauma survivors and their families often don't know what to do to care for themselves. First, it is important to continue to learn more about trauma and its effects.

Family members of a traumatized person should find out as much as they can and get help for themselves, even if their loved one doesn't seek treatment. Family members can encourage the survivor to inquire about education and counseling, but they should not pressure or try to force their loved one to get help. Classes or treatment may also be useful for stress and anger management, addiction, couples communication, or parenting.

While in the process of getting help, if family members feel comfortable, they should let their loved one know that they are willing to listen if the survivor would like to talk about his or her trauma. But the family should stop if anyone gets too upset or overwhelmed.

If everyone is able, it is also important to talk about how the trauma is affecting the family and what can be done about it.

Common Stresses and Solutions:

When Violence Touches Loved Ones

If someone close to you has been the victim of violence, you might be wondering how you can help. Some people have a natural ability to set their own feelings aside and be unconditionally supportive. Others, however, experience a range of their own emotions which can get in the way of being supportive at this traumatic time. You can be supportive by identifying and acknowledging your own feelings about the crime, respecting the victim's decisions, and providing support and suggestions for help.

Acknowledge Your Feelings

You may be inclined to deny that the violence happened, minimizing the impact it may have had on your friend or loved one, or even be angry with and blame the victim. After all, if you accept that your loved one is a victim, then you have to accept that the same violence could happen to you. It's very scary and makes you feel unable to protect yourself, much less those you love. In some ways it's easier to pretend that the violence never happened, or to lash out at or blame the victim.

If you find yourself experiencing these emotions, it can help to speak with your Employee Assistance Program, CONCERN: EAP at 1-800-344-4222 or your community mental health crisis center. Being able to identify and deal with your own emotions about the situation can help you be the supportive person on which your friend or loved one needs to rely.

The Victim Decides

If not incapacitated, an adult victim of violence must make many decisions quickly. These include cooperating with the authorities, hiring an attorney or choosing medical care.

Sometimes, it's very difficult for others to understand the victim's decisions, especially when we're sure we would do it another way. Allow an adult victim to make as many decisions as he or she feels capable. Being a victim temporarily diminishes one's feelings of self-esteem and control over one's own life. The desire to make decisions for oneself is a step to recovery.

Unconditional Support

By acknowledging to yourself your own negative feelings about the violence, and actively listening to the victim and respecting his or her decisions, you'll be able to provide unconditional support. You or others might want to suggest that the victim take advantage of professional counseling and victims' assistance groups in your area. Together, all can help the victim regain self-esteem and control and resume a healthy life.

Self Help – Coping Tips

Sometimes frightening and overwhelming events invade our world. Suddenly our vision of our neighborhood and community as safe and predictable is abruptly shattered. We must first recognize that dealing with tragedy is a process. Ask yourself and others what they think, know, feel or fear before offering guidance. Below are some self-care tips to try.

- Talk to other people about your experiences, reactions & feelings
- Take it easy – don't push yourself!
- Plan extra time to do usual tasks – you may be distracted and not able to function as efficiently as usual
- Re-establish your normal routine as soon as you can do so comfortably – this helps you regain a sense of stability and predictability
- Check to see if your decision-making ability has been impaired (ask for feedback on how you're doing).
- Discuss your current emergency plan with significant others and prepare for future crises.
- Don't forget to eat and eat "smart" – avoid junk food, excessive sugar, alcohol, and caffeine
- Rest and get some exercise
- Recognize that information about the event can be upsetting as well as helpful
- Turn off your radio and television when you start to feel overwhelmed by the news
- If you are having trouble sleeping, listen to soothing music or drink a glass of milk at least a half hour before going to bed
- Reach out to help others – either through volunteer activities, donations of money or supplies, personal support to friends and neighbors

Professional Help is Available

Professional counselors are often familiar with the effects trauma can have on individuals and families – unexpected trauma is unfortunately something we all must live with every day. Should you, a family member or someone you know seem to have difficulty successfully dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic event or situation, do not hesitate to seek professional assistance. The following resources may provide additional information on coping with traumatic events:

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/>

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. Many articles and resources regarding different types of violence in society.

<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/>

- U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Health & Safety Administration website. Information and links regarding; risks, prevention, training, and other resources.

http://www.opm.gov/Employment_and_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/handbooksguides/WorkplaceViolence/index.asp

- U.S. Office of Personnel Management website. Handbook and resources for developing a workplace violence prevention, management, and recovery plan.