

## HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Traumatic events "happen." They may be large events that impact the whole country or the whole civilized world; or they may be events that affect an individual, a family, a neighborhood, or a community. Regardless of their scope, these events can have a powerful impact on anyone caught in their repercussions. As an analogy, one can experience the same effect standing next to a small explosion as they would standing further away from a large one.

As we all try to deal with and comprehend the uncertainties of current events, we must also keep in mind the impact they are having on our children and help them learn to deal with it as well. Young people often do not have enough life experience to keep things in perspective and, because of this, fear can become overwhelming. The following are some common reactions you may see in children who are experiencing trauma. Reactions will vary with the age and developmental stage of the child or adolescent. Generally, older youth will have a need to talk about it and to be reminded of the skills they have to deal with trauma. Younger children will need more reassurance that things are okay and to know who they should go to for help.

The following are some developmental reactions and responses compiled by the Prevention and Community Response Unit of the Washtenaw County Public Health Department that parents and other adults can use to help their children come to terms with their feelings and emotions during this difficult time.

### **Common Reactions & Appropriate Responses from Adults**

#### **AGE: Adolescent to Adult**

##### **Reaction**

- Feel anger, shame, betrayal and act out these feelings in school or the community
- May want to move into the adult world to get away from traumatic events and establish a sense of control over their world
- Very judgmental about their behavior and that of others
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- May have an enhanced sense of immortality or an increased sense of hopelessness
- Depression
- Alcohol and drug use may become a problem
- May engage in high-risk behavior
- May have a fear of being labeled abnormal

##### **Response**

- Acting out may be a way of "pushing the event away. Help them understand that might be what is going on.
- Encourage postponing major decisions in order to allow time for emotions to settle down and to grieve if necessary
- Speak to emotions that are underlying the behavior. "This must be a very frustrating, angry time."
- Help them understand the adult nature of what they are feeling, encourage peer understanding and support
- Help them to not overreact to the impact this may have on their lives, help them grow from it, not lost in it
- Acknowledge the "depressed" feeling that may come and that is survivable and normal
- Acknowledge the anger they may be feeling, and explain how it can contribute to their sense of being "out of control" and "wanting to do something"
- Encourage them to do something pro-active such as donating blood if old enough or volunteering to help at the Red Cross or other organizations

#### **For all ages:**

- Give reassurance and hugs
- Assure them they and their families are safe (if this is the case)
- Limit their exposure to graphic details
- Let them talk and reassure them & solicit their ideas and feelings