

RESPONSE

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Starting to Heal Following National Tragedies



The Oxford High school shootings have affected students, parents, and community members far beyond the boundaries of the township of Oxford, Michigan as they struggle to make sense of the senseless. Offering early emotional support is a vital step in beginning to heal from this tragedy and possibly minimizing harmful, long-term effects from this trauma.

It's natural for children to identify with fellow students upon learning of a school shooting, regardless of age or location. It can be destabilizing to their sense of security, trust, and hope, and can show in a variety of signs parents might observe.

- **Look for sudden changes:** especially in sleeping and eating patterns. Has their mood changed? Are they isolating more, or wanting to avoid certain places or activities they once were able to tolerate? Are they having more physical complaints, either real or imagined? Has the way they play changed or stopped altogether? Are they testing limits more than usual?

- **Look for regression:** Do they struggle with activities that they have previously mastered, such as tying shoes, self-care activities, or have they begun wetting the bed, especially for younger ones? Have older children and teens seemed to genuinely forget how to do household chores, homework assignments, or how to operate devices they previously mastered? Do they appear disorganized or confused?

- **Look for anxiety:** Do you find they are more clingy or distant than usual? Do they appear hyper-alert or over-reactive to sudden or loud noises? Are they having nightmares? Do they express worries or negative thoughts frequently? Are they having difficulty concentrating?

- **Look for despondency:** Do they appear to be lacking energy or motivation? Do they complain of feeling tired or fall asleep at inappropriate times? Do they have difficulty making decisions? Do they appear sad or have crying spells?

Some children or teenagers may respond to news of a school shooting with a cavalier and dismissive attitude that can be alarming to adults. Such a response may be a reflection of their inability to process and apply words to complex and/or foreign feelings and should not always be interpreted as uncaring or disrespectful.

The best thing a parent can do is listen. Be available and encourage a discussion of feelings without pressuring or overwhelming the child. Help them put words to their experience and reflect back what they say so that they can feel understood. Remember the goal is not to solve every issue the child talks about, but rather to listen, validate, and reflect back what has been heard.

- ▶ When discussing issues brought up by the child, use language and ideas that are not only age-appropriate, but appropriate for each individual's needs. Be truthful and compassionate.
- ▶ Create a predictable, safe environment. Try to resume normal daily routines as soon as possible. Engage younger children in anticipating next events to help build a sense of predictability.
- ▶ It's also important parents take care of themselves during times of emergency.
- ▶ A parent who is spiraling from the onslaught of disturbing news will not be in a position to assist their family.
- ▶ Connect with others and express feelings with an understanding, trusting friend or family member. Don't neglect the well-documented benefits of exercise and getting out in nature. Both are proven methods to reduce stress and enhance feelings of well-being.
- ▶ Get adequate sleep with no excuses. Carve out time, at the very least, during times of stress and worry.
- ▶ Children and adults alike can also improve their long-term well-being following a trauma with the support of community connections. And just as communities are living, breathing organisms, they too need support, care, and attention following a tragedy. The connection between individuals and their communities is symbiotic and can be mutually beneficial to the healing process.
- ▶ This can take shape in many forms; consider making a charitable contribution to one of the funds set up to help the victims and the affected community.
- ▶ Blood donations are always a welcome and much needed resource.
- ▶ Attending vigils or church services can also provide an experience of healing.
- ▶ Contact local government offices to see what volunteer opportunities are available.



*Turn **off** the television and get **off** the Internet.*

*Only check the news **once or twice a day**, or **set a time limit** on how long to consume news.*

The Life Advisor EAP is available to provide support and mental health assistance for children, families, and adults. Call **800.448.8326** for more ideas or to make an appointment with a professional.