

# How to Strengthen Children & Teens Against Anxiety After News of a World Trauma

The world is seeing too many days where humanity is shaken by another catastrophic world event. Catastrophic trauma comes with ripples. The world is such a small place now, and when breakage happens, the news can easily and quickly travel to our children, wherever they are. This can breathe life into anxiety and unfathomable possibilities. 'What if something happens while I'm not with you?' 'Could this happen to us?'

It's hard enough for us as adults to make sense of catastrophic trauma, especially when that trauma is at the hands of another human. Many times we just move forward, knowing with full certainty that we will never understand some things. But what about our children? They might have a new normal to adjust to, or questions or fears that were unthinkable before now. As the important adult in their lives, the power you have to strengthen them and move them through trauma is profound.

## **Anxiety after news of a catastrophic trauma. What happens?**

Emotional experiences – ones that come with fear, helplessness, humiliation, grief, pain – often contain information important to our safety. Standing on broken glass, for example, comes with plenty of information about what broken glass feels like against our skin and the damage it can do. We don't want to have to keep learning that broken glass hurts, so those emotional experiences lay themselves down in the brain as powerful memories. The amygdala, the part of the brain involved in anxiety, holds these memories and uses the information in them to identify potential danger and steer us away from trouble. Once an emotional memory is stored, it **can drive behaviour** without us realising.

Here's the rub. These 'memories' don't have to come from our own experiences. Hearing about an emotional experience through the news, a friend, a movie, or social media, can be enough to influence the amygdala. The information contained in the emotional memory can generalise to more specific, personal situations. News of a school shooting, for example, might contain information about school or separation from a parent being unsafe. Your child's amygdala, which has the very important job of keeping him or her safe, might then initiate a powerful instinctive drive for the child to avoid school or separation from you.

## **What might anxiety look like?**

Anxiety can show itself as avoidance, fear of separation, lots of 'what ifs' ('because if I have the information, I might be able to control what happens'), or trouble sleeping (an anxious brain likes to get busy when things are quiet). Physical symptoms might include a sick tummy, nausea, headaches, sore muscles, or butterflies. These can feel awful, but they are evidence of a **strong, healthy brain working as it should** to get us ready to deal with threat – just a little too much.

Children might also show increased anxiety around bedtime. Sleep is an extended separation from a parent. According to the amygdala and the information it might have stored about the trauma, when kids are separated from parents, awful things can happen. You might also see increased fears about things from a fantasy world – monsters, witches, ghosts. These seem completely irrational, but they will often be driven by very rational fears. When a fear is too big to put into words, children might turn that fear into something else. The fear of something happening to you, for example, might be too big for them to think about so it might become anxiety about witches outside their window, or monsters under the bed. If this happens, speak to the feeling rather than the fear, 'That sounds really scary. It can be hard settling into your own

bed when there are frightening things have happened in the world, but you are safe here in your room. I would never leave you if I thought you weren't safe.' ([See here for more ways to help children at bedtime.](#)) Children might not be able to say exactly what is driving their bedtime anxiety, but that's because memories in the amygdala are not stored as words or images. They are stored directly as experiences. It doesn't make the fear any less real, just more difficult to articulate.

Some children and teens might show no outward signs of anxiety at all. This might be because they are completely okay, or because they are still processing what's happened. We all deal with things in our own way, and our children are no different. Some children might seem completely indifferent about the trauma. Some might spend more time doing things that lock out the world for a while (gaming, screen time, solitary time, time with pets). The brain has really clever ways of making sure it doesn't have to deal with more than it can handle too quickly. This is an adaptive response and in the short-term it can be a healthy one. When there has been a catastrophic trauma, the reality of that and the feelings and thoughts connected to it ('what if this happens to me or someone I love?') can feel too big or too unacceptable to process all at once. By distracting themselves, or deflecting away from their feelings, the brain has 'breathing space' to absorb what's happened and what it means to them.

When the feelings can't be pushed down any longer, they might come out as a big reaction to the wrong target or to something that seems fairly benign. A way to support them is to make a safe space for the feelings and words to come out. It's important not to push them to talk though. It's about laying the path in case they want to. Try, 'It seems you have some big feelings in there. I really get it. There have been some big things happen that have been upsetting and frightening. I feel really upset about what's happened this week too. I just want you to know that if you need to talk, I'm here.'

### **How do we help them feel safe again?**

Here are some ways to help them through.

#### [Limit their exposure to stories or reports of the trauma.](#)

Media coverage of world trauma can create emotional 'memories' that drive anxiety. The reports often bring us face to face with the fragility and unpredictability of life. When reporting about the unfathomable breakage of lives, it can be no other way. As adults, we might feel helpless and frightened. We might feel grateful for our own lives and deeply saddened that others have been stolen. Our children have less capacity to make sense of these feelings and what's happened. The more information they are exposed to, the stronger those emotional 'memories' will be, and the more they power they will have to drive anxious thoughts, ('What if this happened to us?') and anxious behaviour – flight (avoidance), or fight (anger, tantrums).

#### [\(Especially if they have been directly involved, as in a classroom lockdown.\)](#)

Limiting their exposure to news stories is particularly important if they have been involved somehow, such as in a classroom lockdown. During lockdowns, teachers and carers work incredibly hard to make sure children feel as safe as possible. Although a lockdown can be scary, for the most part, children will be unaware of the trauma or potential for trauma that might be unfolding outside.

Although their memories may be ones of confusion or similar feelings, hopefully they will also remember feeling mostly safe and cared for.

Our experiences take a while to lay themselves down as memories. If children see vision or hear stories of the frightening truth that was happening outside their classroom too soon, this has enormous potential to change their memories of that lockdown as ones of feeling confused and safe, to terrified. Those memories shift from being memories of themselves as participants in a lockdown in which they felt reasonably safe and cared for, to memories of themselves in a lockdown with unimaginable trauma happening around them. The problem is that all future lockdown drills (which are becoming increasingly part of school life) will have the potential to activate the memories and feelings associated more with the trauma, than the feeling of being kept safe and cared for. It can be impossible especially with older children to keep news out of their hands, particularly if they have their own social media accounts, but wherever possible, if they have been involved directly, try to keep them away from vision or news stories for at least a day or two.

### **Load them up with the good.**

We're wired to give more power to negative information than to positive. Whenever you can, give them positive stories that have come out of the trauma. This will help to dilute the salience of the frightening ones. Tell them about the heroes and the stories of survival, kindness, and compassion. Show them how much the world comes together and holds each other a little tighter when something like this happens.

### **But be mindful of their age, and what they already know.**

It's easier to manage the flow of information with smaller children, but with older children and teens, they will have their own access to the news. Check in to see if they need to talk and answer their questions as honestly as you can while giving only as much information as they need to feel safe.

### **Try to get the thoughts and images from inside of them to outside.**

Whether it's through talking, playing, drawing or writing, anything children do to get the feelings and thoughts out will be a good thing. Children learn, heal and explore through play, so you might find their play is influenced in some way after news of a world trauma. They might use sticks as guns, or they might play hospitals or chase 'baddies', for example. There is no need to shut any of this down. Instead, let it guide the conversations you have with them. Play can be a powerful insight into what's happening for them on the inside. It's also the way children practice staying safe and explore their own power. They can try things out, and be whoever they want to be. Then, whenever they want to they can take off the costume, step out of character, and come back to the safety of their own world.

Face to face talking is especially healing.

Let them talk as much as they need to. Talking connects the emotional right side of the brain to the logical left side. It helps to give context and shape to feelings, which lets those feelings soften. Know that you don't need to fix anything and you don't have to have all the answers. Most importantly, don't let the fear of saying the 'wrong thing' get in the way of saying 'something'. Even if that 'something' lands differently to the way you expected, you can clean it up once it's out there. What's important is opening the space for conversation. Try, 'I'm wondering how you're doing with everything. Would you like to talk?' Having the conversation will always be better than having no conversation at all.

**It's okay if the words don't show up.**

Some children might not want to talk at all, and that's okay. The important thing is letting them know you're there if they need, even if they don't know what to say. Sometimes words can get locked inside big feelings. It can be that way for all of us. Open the door to you a little wider by giving them 'permission' to let you know they'd like to talk, even if the words are messy or not there at all.

Sometimes, they might just need you.

When our children are hurting, the drive to do 'something' to lift them over the heartache of it all might feel monumental, but sometimes they might just need us to sit with them for a while. Maybe they'll talk, maybe they won't – but it's not about that. It's about letting them feel the warmth and safety of you. Touch, warmth and physical closeness can be profoundly healing. Sometimes, they are everything.

Whatever they are feeling is okay.

Sometimes the only way through a big feeling is straight through the middle. Let them know they have the right to feel whatever they feel – sad, angry, confused, or maybe nothing at all. When a big feeling comes to the surface, acknowledge this and hold the space for the feeling to be and to fade when it's ready – 'I can hear how sad you are about this. I really get it. I know a lot of people are feeling that way.' Then if you can, cut through the helplessness that can come with big feelings and nurture a sense of commonality and empowerment – 'When lots of people feel sad like you do, the world comes together to look after the people who have been hurt,' or, 'I understand why this has made you feel scared. It's a scary thing to happen. What I know is that you're safe and there are really great people working hard to make the world safer and to make sure that something like this doesn't happen again.'

Let them know their feelings are normal.

Research has found that most children will recover well after trauma, but the children who seem to take longer are more likely to perceive their symptoms as being a sign that something is seriously wrong with them.

After a traumatic event, children might have intrusive memories, nightmares, and flashbacks. These are very normal for two to four weeks after a trauma, and it's important that children understand this if they are experiencing any of these symptoms. The children who struggle to recover tend to be the ones who take their symptoms as a sign that something is very wrong with them and spend a lot of time – an excessive amount of time – trying to make sense of their trauma. Talking and thinking about what happened can be very healing, but like all things that are good for us humans, too much is too much. It seems that when children spend too long focusing on what happened and the reasons for that, they can get stuck. To help children and teens from ruminating and becoming stuck, let them know that what they are feeling is really normal. Let them talk as much as they need to, but also encourage them to talk about the good news stories, and wherever you can, remind them of their own resilience. Are they going to school even if it feels tough? Are they sleeping in their own bed? They might not realise that these things matter but they do – they speak to the courage and resilience that is in them.

Give them an opportunity to do 'something'.

After a trauma, we open our hearts and stretch our arms around the people who have been hurt. This is how we remind ourselves and each other that there will always be more good than bad, more love than hate, and more standing together than apart. That's the humanity we want our children to know and to feel embraced by. Encouraging them towards their own acts of kindness will nurture feelings of connection to a kind and loving humanity. These acts might include

laying flowers, writing a note, or doing jobs to earn money to donate to a charity that is looking after the people who have been hurt. This will help to replace feelings of helplessness with a sense of helpfulness and the awareness that they can make a difference.

### Gratitude – another way to load them with the good.

Hearing about emotional experiences can create memories that drive anxious thoughts and behaviour. Thoughts and memories create pathways in the brain, so the more a thought or memory is accessed, the easier it will be to access in the future. Research has found that gratitude can increase our store of positive ‘memories’ and make them more accessible, giving them a greater influence on thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. To nurture a gratitude practice, in the morning or before bedtime, ask your child or teen to name three things they are grateful for. Encourage them to write them in a journal, or write them down and put them into a gratitude jar. This will create a visual cue, as well as something they can go to when they need to a reminder of the good in their world.

### Could this happen to me?

Significant trauma ignites our empathy and our need to come together with love and support for the ones who have been hurt, but it can also make us aware of our own fragility. People just like us, who love like us, have been hurt in unimaginable ways. We don’t see strangers and nameless faces. We see mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and sisters and brothers, and we wonder what would happen if those loved ones that were stolen, were ours. Our children will also be asking their own questions. ‘Am I safe?’ ‘What if something happens to you?’ This can be tough to respond to. The truth is often we will often be grazing against the hard edges of the same fears, but we can give them what they need to feel safe enough

More than ever, our children will need to trust that we believe they are safe enough. Just as they did when they bumped and scraped they were little, when they are hurting they will look to us, then back to themselves, then back to us. There are two reasons they do this:

#### **‘Do you see me?’**

The first thing children are looking for is, ‘do you see me?’ as in, ‘Do you see I’m hurt/hurting?’ We can give them what they need by naming what we see, ‘I can see how confused you are by this,’ or, ‘It sounds like it scared you when you didn’t know what the noises were. That sounds really frightening.’ When we acknowledge what they are feeling, it helps them ‘feel felt’. They know we get it. More importantly, it sends a message to the protective amygdala that support is here, which lets the amygdala step down.

#### **‘Do you think I’ll be okay?’**

The second reason they look to us is for confirmation that they’ll be okay. Sometimes we might be dealing with our own anxiety about their vulnerability, especially in the wake of a school shooting or a random attack on humanity. Do we want to bundle them up and keep them close? For sure. Do we feel okay about sending them back out there? Maybe not. Do we feel safe **enough**? Yes. We might feel anxious, but we feel safe enough and sure enough that they’ll be okay. We wouldn’t send them out there if we didn’t.

Let them see that you feel safe for them to do what you are asking, whether it’s going to school, or perhaps being separated from you. They might not believe it for a while and that’s okay. Let them lean against you for as long as they need to, but at the same time, encourage them forward. This is important. The brain will do more of whatever the brain does most. If we

support their avoidance for too long, the brain will wire around this and respond to the world as though the only way to stay safe is to stay with you. When there has been a scare, the only way an anxious amygdala can learn that something (the world/school/separating from a parent) is safe enough, is through experience.

This might be tough for a while. It can be so distressing to move them forward when everything in you is telling you to scoop them up and hold them close, but we don't want to shrink their world. When everything in you is telling you to pull them back, ask, 'do I believe in them, or do I believe their anxiety?'

### But how do you know it won't happen to me?

This can be one of the toughest questions. The truth is, we never know with 100% certainty that the people we love will always be safe, but we can be certain **enough**. Explaining the differences between what happened in the world, and their world, can help. If it's a catastrophic weather event, for example, it might be something like, 'We live in a different part of the country and tornadoes don't happen here.' If it's something that theoretically could happen to anybody, such as a mass shooting, let them know what is different now. Maybe they caught the person responsible so that person can never hurt anybody again. Sometimes that won't be enough though, because the response might understandably be, 'but what if it's a different person who tries to hurt us?' If they ask this, speak about what we have learned. 'Every time something like this happens, we learn how to stay safer. We learn how things like this happen, so we can stop it happening again. There are people who are working really hard to make sure we're safe, and I trust them.'

### It's okay if they need a little extra support.

Some children might need extra support to help them through. Give them enough time to work through the trauma in their own way. There is no right way. If you feel as though the intrusion into their day-to-day life is causing significant problems for them, speak to a professional for support. The good news is that anxiety is very manageable.

And finally ...

Children will respond to news of catastrophic trauma in their own way. Some children will respond with big feelings. Some with none. Some might have nothing to say. Some will talk and talk. Don't underestimate the power of you to bring their world back to safe enough. Every child has it in them to be brave enough and strong enough – and they all want to be this. The job for us as the important adults in their lives is helping them know they are part of a humanity that is loving, strong, brave, and kind, and one which will stand together with each other and for each other, so the world can be a safer and better one for all of us.

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