



Tips for Media Covering Traumatic Events

TIPS

Media coverage of traumatic events must be executed with care—people who have experienced trauma may be hurt in very personal, intimate ways, and press coverage of the events can benefit these people or unintentionally add harm to harm. For example, after 9/11, trauma experts advised that repeated viewing of television images of the World Trade Center collapse could retraumatize some viewers for years after the event, whether they had experienced the original events directly or indirectly. Had this advice been made more widely available, the public would have had information on which to base personal decisions about television viewing.

Events that happen on an individual level, such as horrific child abuse, also can be traumatic for communities. As with events that effect many people, news coverage of these occurrences can do both good and harm. Again, journalists have an opportunity and responsibility to reduce potential harm and promote strength for both individuals and communities.

The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress has prepared the following guidelines for reporters, producers, and editors to help enhance responsible news coverage of stories that involve child traumatic stress.

1

Safety First

- **Tell the public about dangers and safety plans.**

The media can play an important role in strengthening a community's ability to prepare for and respond to traumatic events. By providing information about risks associated with an event and about safety plans, news professionals can increase families' abilities to respond to danger in an effective manner. The more parents know, the better they can address children's questions about personal, family, and community safety. Furthermore, when the media takes pro-active steps to educate communities about plans prior to an anticipated event, like a severe storm, families' abilities to respond to the event are increased.

- **Provide information that enhances trust.**

Just as children look to their parents to provide a protective shield against danger and harm, families look to their communities and government to provide similar security. The press is perhaps the greatest conduit of information from such sources. Traumatic events, particularly terrorist acts, can threaten a basic sense of safety. They can weaken faith and trust in the effectiveness of official responses and social institutions. It is important for news sources to inform the public about specific steps that community and government leaders are taking to protect them.

- **Help restore a predictable order.**

Families' and communities' sense of safety can be undermined when there is a breakdown in order. Traumatic events significantly impact such order. Children are particularly vulnerable to increased distress when their world is unpredictable. The media can be instrumental in helping to restore order after a traumatic event. By providing information and increasing awareness, the media can increase a general sense of control and predictability. When it is advisable, education about the importance of re-establishing routine, even in the smallest of ways, can increase a person's feelings of safety. Stories that highlight the ways families, schools, and communities restore safety and predictability can help hasten the recovery process of traumatized people.

2

Managing Exposure

- **Educate about media exposure.**

Research has shown that news stories can be reminders of the original event, and reactions to the coverage may be similar to the original reactions. Media outlets may wish to consider sidebar stories explaining potential reactions to coverage of a traumatic event. These may aid viewers/readers in better understanding their possible responses to difficult material as well as help them make informed decisions about how they manage their exposure. Consider making judicious use of images in order to reduce the potential stress on the audience. As the news media inform communities about events, so too can they educate families about how excessive viewing of TV coverage may impact viewers, especially children.

- **Encourage parents to regulate children's exposure.**

Children may be especially vulnerable to strong images and reminders. News stories, particularly those with graphic detail, may be preceded by a brief commentary (i.e., "the following is graphic in nature and may be upsetting to young viewers/readers"). Such a message may help parents to pause and consider the impact of such exposure for their children.

- **Timing is everything.**

When covering anniversaries of traumatic events such as 9/11, it is important to consider the timing of pieces on television and radio. Consider the timing of broadcast stories containing graphic images or excessive reminders of the event, perhaps slating these for airing at times when they are less likely to be seen or heard by children.

3

Interviewing Children

- **Remember that recovery time varies.**

After a traumatic event, children vary in their healing and recovery. Reporters should bear in mind that reliving painful events and details, with a focus on loss and suffering, may increase the likelihood of traumatic reactions months or years after the original events.

- **Consider children's expectations of an interview.**

Generally, children being interviewed try to be helpful to reporters. When discussing a loss or reliving an event, they may be concerned about doing a good job and may provide information they believe the reporter wants to hear, rather than their true thoughts.

- **Gain permission.**

Whenever possible, help families make informed choices about interviews. Provide them with the purpose of the story. Be sure to obtain parental permission before interviewing a child, and have a family member present during the interview.

4

Helping Families Help Children

- **Promote family talk.**

Encourage parents to talk about the news with their children. Young children may overestimate their risk when they see pictures of frightening events. Clearly describe the events taking place, and place them in context. It is important that parents find out what children are worried about and discuss the worries with them. Encourage them to do so.

- **Tell viewers about reactions that may occur.**

Let individuals and families know about traumatic stress reactions. As a general rule of thumb, if a child's traumatic stress reactions (e.g. nightmares, recurrent thoughts or fears) get worse instead of better over time, parents should consider seeking a referral to a qualified mental health professional. Parents should also consider seeking help if they observe the following signs in their child or adolescent: withdrawal from friends or family, lack of participation in family activities, school refusal for a period of weeks or months, marked deterioration in ability to concentrate leading to diminished grades, preoccupation with fear, grief, or guilt to the exclusion of talking or thinking about anything else, fear of leaving the house or doing usual activities, dropping out of sports or other social activities, and isolation from peers.