We are all shocked and saddened by the tragic events that recently occurred in Virginia Beach. As challenging as this event is to us, consider how difficult it is for children to mentally and emotionally process. Like adults, children struggle to make sense of trauma and experience emotional reactions to frightening experiences. However, children are very sensitive and, as their resiliency skills are not yet fully developed, require special support to effectively deal with a traumatic event. Parents, guardians, and family members play an important role in helping children cope with trauma and the following information from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provides valuable information to support such an effort.

**What is a traumatic event?**
Events we commonly categorize as traumatic include natural and man-made (accidental) disasters, mass acts of violence, and terrorist attacks. Beyond these events, children can face many other traumas such as enduring abuse, losing loved ones, and witnessing others being harmed by violence.

**What is trauma?**
There are two types of trauma—physical and mental. Physical trauma refers to the body's response to serious injury and threat. Mental trauma refers to frightening thoughts and painful feelings. Mental trauma can produce strong feelings such as intense fear and helplessness, and extreme behavior such as withdrawal or detachment, lack of concentration, irritability, sleep disturbance, aggression, hyper-vigilance, and flashbacks.

**Which children need help?**
Support should be offered to all children, but some may be more vulnerable to the trauma's effects and need more help than others, or help for a longer period than others. Children who may be more vulnerable include those with existing mental health problems, those who were direct victims of the trauma, those with a personal history of prior trauma, or those lacking an established support network of family and friends. Monitor children’s healing process and help them obtain the appropriate help for their particular needs.

**How can I help?**
There are many ways that adults can help children. Some of the basics include:
- Attend to children by listening to them, accepting their feelings, and helping them cope with the reality of their experience.
- As able, reduce other sources of stress such as changes in place of residence, extended separation from family and friends, school pressures, transportation issues, family conflicts, and being hungry.
- Pay attention to their recovery, understanding that it takes time, noting severe reactions, and attending to sudden changes in behavior, speech, language use, or emotions,
- Reassure them by reminding that you love them, support them, and will be with them when possible.

**What works best when helping children cope with a traumatic event?**
There are many specific things that adults can do when supporting a traumatized child, to include:
- Explain what happened, but don't make children discuss the event before they are ready.
- Emphasize that the event was not their fault and it is okay for them to feel upset.
• Allow children to be sad, cry, talk/write/draw about their feelings, and don’t get angry if they show strong emotions.
• Don’t expect children to be brave or tough.
• Don’t get upset if they begin bed-wetting, acting out, or thumb-sucking.
• Keep normal routines, if possible, such as meal time, playtime, bedtime rituals, etc.
• Help them feel in control by, if possible, letting them choose meals, pick out clothes and make decisions for themselves.
• Don’t make promises that you can’t keep.

Do children of different ages react differently to trauma?
It’s important to understand that every child has a unique reaction to trauma. The reactions differ in onset, duration, severity, and manifestation. Reactions can vary by age and while specific reactions may be typical of a particular age group, they may also be observed in younger or older children. Young children’s reactions are strongly influenced by adults’ reactions to the event. Some typical reactions by age include:

Children age 5 and under:
• Facial expressions of fear
• Cling to parent or caregiver
• Cry or scream
• Whimper or tremble
• Move aimlessly or become immobile
• Return to behaviors characteristic of younger children, such as sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, and fearing the dark

Children age 6 to 11:
• Feel emotionally numb
• Become filled with guilt
• Become depressed
• Develop unfounded fears
• Complain of unfounded physical problems
• Have nightmares or other sleep problems
• Isolate themselves
• Become irritable or disruptive; have outbursts of anger; start fights
• Become quiet around friends, family, and teachers
• Refuse to go to school
• Are unable to concentrate
• Do poorly with school and homework

Children age 12 to 17:
• Flashback to the traumatic event
• Avoid reminders of the event
• Use and abuse drug, alcohol or tobacco
• Display antisocial or destructive behavior
• Have physical complaints
• Have nightmares or other sleep problems
• Feel isolation or confusion
• Feel of guilt or revenge
• Develop depression
• Have suicidal thoughts

How do I know if children need help beyond what I can personally provide?
As noted previously, children experience trauma differently, so it’s difficult to tell who will develop mental health problems. Some trauma survivors get better with only good support. Others need counseling by a mental health professional. If, after a month in a safe environment, children are not able to perform normal routines or if they develop new symptoms of traumatic stress, then contact a health professional.

Likewise, some symptoms require immediate attention as soon as they are observed, such as a racing heart and sweating, being extremely sad or depressed, obsessive thoughts or flashbacks about the event, having thoughts about ending one’s life, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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For more information, visit: nimh.nih.gov.

If you would like to speak with one of our counselors about a traumatic event that is challenging your child, call 1-800-899-8174 or 757-363-6777.