

When You or Your Children Are Upset by News Reports

Overview

How media coverage can add to feelings of stress and fear.

- Stress reactions to media coverage
- Taking a break from media coverage
- Resurfacing feelings of grief and anxiety
- Media coverage and children

Media coverage of a crime, natural disaster, war, act of terrorism, or other disturbing event provides us with vital and helpful information. News reports can keep us informed about what is happening and things we may need to do.

But too much exposure to media coverage of frightening events can add to our distress and make us and our children feel anxious. Continual reports on burglaries in our community may be as disturbing as accounts of far-off disasters, because the local news stories involve events that are closer to home and may affect us more personally. Below is information on ways to keep media coverage from adding to feelings of stress for you and your family.

Stress reactions to media coverage

Today, with live TV and radio broadcasts from around the world and instant news online, news of traumatic events comes streaming into our living rooms and onto our computer screens as never before. The growing use of cell phones that connect to the Internet has made media coverage even harder to avoid.

We witness frightening events in color and it can feel as if we are really there. Graphic and disturbing images and nonstop coverage of traumatic events can cause us to feel traumatized even if we were not directly impacted by the trauma or tragedy. Experts call this “vicarious trauma” or “secondary trauma.” The signs of vicarious trauma include

- prolonged sadness and crying
- inability to concentrate
- nausea, headaches, and muscle aches
- fear and anxiety
- sleep problems
- distressing dreams
- a general sense of uneasiness
- isolation and withdrawal from others
- outbursts of anger
- depression

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- irritability
- disorientation
- exacerbation of chronic medical conditions

The signs of vicarious trauma in children include

- daydreaming
- separation anxiety
- regressive behavior, such as bed-wetting
- not wanting to go to school

Taking a break from media coverage

If you are experiencing stress reactions to media coverage or if the news is making you feel anxious, do the following:

- *Take a break from listening to or watching media coverage of stressful events.* Avoid reading news stories about the events or watching news or documentary programs on TV. Avoid going online to follow the coverage.
- *Find ways to fill the gap.* Watching the news can be a habit, so find other ways to spend the time you usually watch TV news. For instance, go for a walk, spend more time planning and enjoying meals, listen to favorite music, or read a book.
- *Take a break from talking about stressful events in the media with friends and relatives.*
- *Talk with a professional if your symptoms persist.* Your employee assistance program (EAP) can help.

Resurfacing feelings of grief and anxiety

Some people may be especially affected by media coverage, including those who have experienced a loss and those who have experienced a violent crime, natural disaster, war, catastrophe, or personal crisis. Traumatic events may trigger memories of past losses or events even if they happened many years ago, and may bring back images of previous traumas, nightmares, and feelings of grief, fear, and sadness. Below are suggestions if you or someone you love is experiencing feelings of grief or anxiety that may be triggered by extensive media coverage of a traumatic event.

- *Realize that graphic images and stories on TV can affect your mood and feelings.* If you feel sad, overwhelmed, or more angry or irritable than usual, limit your exposure to news coverage of the traumatic events and spend extra time with friends or family. Do something that you find relaxing.
- *Talk with someone you trust* about the recent events and about past losses or experiences that may be affecting you now.

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- *If your work is affected, talk about your fears and concerns with a professional.* Your EAP can assist you in finding help.
- *Try to keep to a regular pattern of eating and sleeping.* This gives you the strength to cope with stress.
- *Get as much exercise as possible.* Many people find that exercise makes it easier to cope with painful emotions.
- *Seek support from your faith community.* During difficult periods many people find comfort and solace in their faith communities.

Media coverage and children

Children who repeatedly see images of violence and trauma on TV or in newspapers may have continued fears about their own safety and that of their family. Children who have lost a pet, experienced a separation or divorce, or lost a friend or relative may be deeply affected. You can protect and support your child by doing the following:

- *Limit exposure to news coverage of disturbing events.* Closely monitor what your child is seeing on TV or on the computer and what he or she is reading in magazines and in the newspaper.
- *Be present if your child does watch TV coverage of disturbing events.* That way you can answer your child's questions and talk about concerns. It is important to be present even if your child is a teenager. Again, limit the amount of coverage your child watches.
- *Take extra steps if the coverage involves a crime or other frightening event in your community.* Find out what your child knows or has heard from friends so you can correct any mistaken ideas that he or she may have picked up.
- *Spend extra time with your child.*
- *Keep to family routines.*
- *Plan a family outing or activity your child enjoys.*
- *Try, as much as possible, to be together during difficult times.*

The program that provided this publication has additional resources on coping with stress and disturbing events.

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