

The 10 Year Anniversary of 9/11/01: Stress, Trauma and Media Overload

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There will be a great deal of media coverage focusing on the 10-year anniversary of September 11, 2001. While many networks and cable outlets have taken the appropriate step to avoid showing traumatic or graphic images of planes, people and buildings, there will be some print, television and radio organizations flooding the environment with reminders of 9/11/01 and its aftermath. It is possible to limit media consumption in your home, but you may not have control over what your children see and hear outside of home.

For the past ten years media messages of destruction, terrorism, injury and loss have changed the social environment of young people. Researchers have found that contact with such events, *through the media*, can negatively impact children's emotional functioning and perceptions of the world. To counterbalance the potential of such negative influences, it is important to create a plan of action that will minimize and hopefully avoid media overload. In addition to the importance of developing 'media literacy' skills in the home (i.e. understanding why and how media messages are sent) there are other factors to consider when preparing a family media plan:

- How closely your family members and friends were impacted by 9/11.
- How old your children were in 2001.
- Other losses or traumatic events experienced by your family.
- Personal recollections of 2001 media messages and how you reacted to stories, images, sounds, discussions, etc.

Be Prepared

First, think about how and why media texts (TV programs and news, movies, radio, newspapers and magazines, internet, social networking, music, etc) are used. Consider the questions below to help your children understand media messages as well (The Center for Media Literacy):

- Who created this message and why are they sending it?
 - The 10 year anniversary of 9/11
 - Compare this to the "saturation" experienced with other events (Superbowl, elections, Academy awards, etc.)
- What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
 - Dramatic approaches, music, re-enactments, graphic images, etc.
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in this message?
 - Is only one side of the story told?
- What is omitted from this message? Why do you think it was left out?
 - Balance tragedy with resilience and recovery. What are the positive things that came after 9/11, for the community, the nation, the world?
- How might different people interpret this message?
 - People who were directly affected? Lost a family member or friend?
 - Children too young to understand.

Suggestions For Children And Adolescents

Under 13 Years: Children under the age of 13 today will have almost no memory of 9/11/01 (unless family members have already shared their experiences). Viewing any programming related to 9/11 *should* be preceded by family discussion of what happened on 9/11/01. Children under 7 years of age should not watch any programming related to 9/11. Instead, consider reading and talking about some of the storybooks that tell the story of courage and caring after 9/11: *14 Cows for America, Fireboat, September Roses, The Little Chapel that Stood*.

To begin the conversation, *first ask* your children/teens what they've heard (from friends, other parents, classmates) and what questions they have. You will need to provide them with factual information, i.e. when we talk about the enormity of human loss on 9/11, it is also important to point out that thousands of people survived and reached safety following the terrorist attacks. Also talk about positive change post-9/11, the new safety rules instituted in the US and much of the world (airport safety procedures, screening at ballparks, museums, etc).

Over 14 Years: Young people over 14 years will have memories of how family members and/or teachers reacted on 9/11/01. They will likely recall who came to pick them up at school, how announcements were made, if school was closed, what others did, and watching their family view TV coverage. These experiences are worth exploring and provide an opportunity to clarify misconceptions by talking with parents, grandparents and family members. In addition, you may need to clarify and provide factual information.

Monitor and Research Programs. Read as much as you can about media programs ahead of time. Decide which ones, if any, would be appropriate for your family. Talk about it with your children.

DVR/Tape/Record and Watch Later: Consider recording television programs and viewing them later; form your own opinions and consider how your family will react. Saving the program for when children are older and better able to understand the events of 9/11 may be a sensible choice as well. Determine which programs will be rebroadcast at a later time.

Provide Alternatives: In preparation before the anniversary date, when there will be 24/7 coverage on all media outlets, be sure you have non-9/11 alternatives for your family: pre-recorded programs, movies, books, games, etc.

Watch with Your Family: It is strongly recommended that school age children/teens of any age should NOT watch any 9/11 related programming alone. They should be with caring adults, family members, and good friends. First determine if the program will be appropriate for your children (age, personal experience). By joining your child/teen you will know the exact content of the program as well as the context of the information. You will also have the opportunity to observe their reactions (tearfulness, fidgeting, crying, very quiet or even "silly" remarks or behaviors). Look for these signs that your child may be experiencing intensified fears or anxieties or changed behaviors such as sleeplessness, stomach distress, crying, or worrying

about safety and security. Do not ask, “Are you okay?” or “Are you upset?” Instead point out the behavior you have noticed and ask what he/she is thinking or feeling, “I see you are kind of quiet, tell me what you’re thinking?” You also have the benefit of offering comfort and security to your child or teen through physical proximity.

Talk and Share: If you and your family do watch/listen/read about 9/11, talk about it and reactions to it, the physical reactions as well as feelings and thoughts. Plan time to talk in a quiet, comfortable and familiar place. Don’t let children/teens go to bed without having a chance to talk about their reactions, even if you think they are “okay.”

Share your own thoughts and feelings. Don’t hesitate to “open” communication with your own reactions, “This is so moving.... I feel a lump in my throat...what about you?” If you cry, don’t try to hide it, acknowledge that this event has affected many people. However, be confident about safety and security issues. Children take their cues from adults and how we respond to media; they will watch your behavior and determine if they really are safe. Praise your children when they suggest their own hopeful and positive thoughts.

Acknowledge children’s/teen’s feelings. Recognize, accept and respect your children’s feelings. Let them know that others feel the same way.

Provide reassurance regarding safety and security in simple, age-appropriate words. Don’t give false reassurance; be realistic and honest without being an alarmist.

Explore Self-Care Strategies: Let children and teens know that there are ways to feel better as we cope with uncomfortable feelings. Help them identify what provides relief and support. Encourage them to use those strategies, especially talking to others about their feelings. Read/tell a favorite story before bed, offer a favorite food or drink, play favorite or relaxing music, give/get a hug, talk and depending on your beliefs, pray or meditate.

Check in the next morning: how did your family sleep, were there any dreams, disturbing thoughts, etc.

Special considerations: If you are still feeling somewhat upset from the events of 9/11; i.e. experience difficulty sleeping, have a hard time concentrating at work or school, or can’t seem to get thoughts and images of September 11th out of your mind, you should limit or avoid access to media.

For those who have experienced loss or another crisis since September 11th, viewing and reading about 9/11 stories and programs may bring back feelings from all events in the past ten years.