

Support Teens and Young Adults When Tragedies Happen in the Community

BY LAUREN SCHNEIDER, LCSW

It has become the new normal that acts of terrorism or mass shootings claim the lives of innocent adults and children in this country. Parents, educators and mental health professionals are left to respond to the “How’s,” “Why’s,” and “What If’s” that teens and young adults struggle with in the tragedy’s wake.

On November 8, 2018 the peaceful bedroom community of Thousand Oaks was drawn into the nation’s focus after 28-year-old Ian David Long, a United States Marine Corps veteran, shot 12 people, mostly college students enjoying country music night at a local hangout. Some of these young adults were survivors of the Route 91 Harvest concert shooting in Las Vegas just one year earlier. The survivors watched in horror as friends, despite their attempts to help, were struck by the very bullets that they had somehow managed to avoid then. As the story broke we were struck by the familiarity of the scene. Young people clung to one another in tears. Parents arrived frantically searching for their sons or daughters amidst the chaos of emergency vehicles and news trucks.

Parents wondered how to comfort their grieving offspring and at the same time questioned how they would ever feel

comfortable giving them the freedom to venture back out in the world that young adults require. Friends wondered how to support their friends who were at the bar or who had a loved one die that night.

What to Look Out For — Signs of Acute Stress Reaction:

Early signs that a person who’s survived a traumatic event and experienced the death of a close friend or family member is experiencing a mental health condition known as Acute Stress Reaction include:

- Feelings of numbness or amnesia
- Experiencing flashbacks or intrusive images and/or nightmares
- Avoiding places or things that remind you of the traumatic event
- Trouble concentrating or sleeping; irritability

If these symptoms continue or worsen after one month, the person may be suffering from a more severe reaction to the trauma called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

How to Help:

In this case the person, regardless of their age, should begin treatment with a licensed

mental health professional to ensure that the symptoms of traumatic stress don’t become permanent. Friends can support someone who is grieving over the death of a loved one by staying close and providing a listening ear. The grieving teen or young adult will need friends who are there to both comfort them and provide a break from the intensity of their grief and trauma response. This can include enjoying normal things like seeing a movie, going for a hike or just hanging out. Friends can also monitor for increased dependence on substances by their peers. Substance use can be the person’s only coping skill or way to numb the pain but can lead to other problems.

If you are concerned about a grieving friend or family member who is not receiving any form of professional help for their grief or trauma responses, it is recommended that you reach out to their parent or guardian and ask for their help getting your friend the treatment they need to heal.

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