

# Helping adolescents

Adolescents involved in crisis and traumatic events, may not always show their distress outwardly. As a result, adults may misunderstand their needs or find them unwilling to accept help. This fact sheet lists common reactions to trauma and suggests ways for adults to help adolescents cope with a crisis.

A trauma is any event which harms or threatens a person or someone close to them and involves high emotional arousal. Such events are never accurately remembered or fully understood. Since the impact on the adolescent is related to their stage of development some important aspects of adolescence need to be considered.

## Adolescent development

Adolescents frequently lose the self assurance they had when younger, but often gain other types of confidence and abilities. Parents, and adolescents themselves, are confused by their inconsistent behaviour. They can think rationally, but have unstable emotions and may not apply logical thinking to real situations. They need support and independence to learn this. They want to be both close to others and time to be alone as they find new ways of relating to people. To communicate with adolescents, these contradictions have to be understood. Moodiness, depression and insecurity commonly alternate with excitement, happiness and adventurousness.

## The family

Whereas children are dependent on parents and live within the family, adolescents are usually proud that they could survive on their own. School, peers, other adults and social or sporting groups are a large part of their support network. They often do not feel the family is the life support system it was in childhood. Parents may feel sidelined, but their importance is no less than before, just different.

Adolescents usually don't understand these changes although they feel the frustration of them. They need their family to be a trusted home base for their adjustment to painful events, but how much they rely on their family to come to grips with what has happened varies greatly from one person to another.

## The peer group

Friends and acquaintances are an essential part of a adolescent's day to day life. Groups may appear to be a distraction, but they give security in coping with emotional problems. A sense of normality is gained by comparing themselves with peers. Adolescents feel abnormal when they are different to their peers, and this threatens their sense of self. The peer group often seems to be their life support system. They need to be with peers, just as they previously needed to be with their parents. This is normal, though some adolescents have difficulty getting the right balance between peers and family. Interest in music, fashion, sport or skateboarding — even if done alone — can give the support of shared experiences of the peer culture. Parents who oppose peer influences cause intense conflict and often lose the battle because the adolescent feels the parent's opposition is a threat to their survival. Parents help best when they share their adolescent with peer groups. Rather than competing with peers' influence, adults need to develop good communication and give the adolescents time to form their own judgments of peers and evaluate the group.

## The adolescent's experience

Adolescents are often more involved in doing things than understanding emotions and may lack words to express important feelings. They handle painful events by distracting themselves. They may be immersed in their own feelings and point of view and not recognize adults' reactions. They may feel threatened when adults try to be logical about painful experiences and not fully understand what is said until later. But their behaviour often shows they have taken notice even when they don't acknowledge it. It is important to allow time for them to work things out and not demand immediate feedback. Parents' own anxiety may make adolescents confused and guilty or cause them to reject the parent's emotions to protect themselves.

## Common responses

These responses are all signs of the stress of coming to terms with crisis or trauma. They are normal and should pass with time.

- excessive concern for others, guilt, anxiety and insecurity
- sleeplessness or wanting to sleep all the time
- withdrawal from family, spending increased time alone listening to music or watching TV
- wanting to be around the family more than before or more dependent on family or other people
- sudden need for independence expressing feelings like 'don't treat me like a child' and 'you're only my Mother'
- uncooperative, irritable and only concerned with what is important to them
- bored, listless and dissatisfied unable to cope with responsibilities or duties, reverting to immature or irresponsible behaviour
- preoccupation with the trauma, wanting to talk about it all the time – or angrily refusing to talk about it
- more detached from life, the future or interests, and an unwillingness to set goals
- want to do everything now: they are impatient or intolerant
- pessimism and cynicism, loss of interest in the future
- changed values and philosophy of life poor concentration, memory, organisation, planning skills and reduced school performance
- restlessness, always needing to be doing something or be with peers
- exaggerated emotional reactions to small problems
- angry, controlling, assertive and demanding
- exaggeration or return of previous problems.

## How to help

To help reactions subside, adolescents need the support and understanding of adults. A number of strategies help them achieve this:

- Give them accurate information about the event and its consequences.
- Correct any misunderstandings and rumours, but do not burden them with details unnecessary to the overall understanding
- Encourage them to express emotions and put thoughts into words—if not with you, make sure they talk to someone.
- Expressing strong emotions is a natural way to come to terms with trauma. As the emotions subside recovery starts.
- Suppressed emotions can cause long term problems.

- Keep communicating, if they won't talk about emotions, ask the adolescent what they are thinking.
- Let them know about your reactions, explain about stress and recovery. Even if they don't admit it, they do take in what is said
- Keep telling them you love and care about them no matter what they do or say.
- If they object to what you are doing, don't argue, ask them how else you can help.
- Reassure them about the future, especially that their current distress will pass in time.
- Make plans to reduce pressure at school or in other activities if they are having trouble coping.
- Support them to continue their social and recreational activities, to play, explore, laugh, even though the adults themselves may not want to.
- Maintain routine and familiar activities, ensure life is secure and predictable; minimise change.
- Keep them informed about how their recovery is progressing and what help is available.

Don't make this the time to have disputes about normal problems such as work, chores or defiance. Leave this for later or it will be confused with the crisis reactions. The problems usually fade as adolescents recover. If not, the problems will be more successfully worked out later.

Adolescents' striving for independence, seeking help from peers and adults other than their parents and expressing critical attitudes are all indications of parents' success in giving adolescents the strength and confidence to become adults. This behaviour needs to be valued and worked with rather than against. Sometimes, adolescents have a narrower point of view and can accept the trauma in a matter-of-fact way. They may not need their parents as much as parents need them. When this happens parents must continue to be available, but in a different, more detached way and avoid burdening adolescents with their own distress as much as possible.

Trauma also provides adolescents with opportunities for growth and discovery about themselves. With help, adolescents can eventually mature as a result of the experience. They often show strength and resilience that has not been evident before.

## **When to seek assistance**

Under some circumstances it is important to seek advice from someone trained to understand crisis, trauma and adolescents.

This should be done when:

- Parents are particularly worried or do not understand their adolescent's behaviour.
- The adolescent does not spend any time at home.
- They will not communicate about themselves or what they are doing.
- They show continuing distress or depression.
- They begin to abuse substances or increase their use.
- There is no progress in recovery from the reactions.
- They engage in reckless, irresponsible or self destructive behaviour.

Early help is most effective and can prevent complications before they become established. If the adolescent does not want to come to an appointment, parents can attend and will benefit from the chance to get advice and strategies. The best gift you can offer adolescents is patience and understanding. Don't hesitate to seek advice if you do not understand any aspect of their behaviour or have questions. With the right assistance, recovery from trauma may not be as painful for either adolescents or their parents.

New Zealand Government