

Media Coverage of Traumatic Events: Watch What You're Watching

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You might find it difficult to look away from extensive media coverage of events related to disasters and other traumatic events.

“In a time of increased stress, media coverage of events can take on a life of its own,” says Rich Paul, Senior Vice President, Product Innovation, for Beacon Health Options. “For your well-being, you should limit how much you watch.”

Tips for adults

Especially if you are feeling anxious or stressed after watching a news program, cannot turn off the television or participate in recreational activities and are having trouble sleeping, you may want to consider limiting the amount and type of media coverage that you are viewing. Some strategies that may be useful include:

- Limit your news intake to a half-hour per day, for example
- Limiting viewing just prior to bedtime
- Reading newspaper and journal articles rather than watching television

Also, if you want to talk about current events, Mr. Paul suggests that you “find someone who is supportive and can help you keep perspective, rather than someone who heightens and exacerbates your worries and concerns.”

Special considerations for children

Depending upon your child’s age and maturity, you may want to limit the amount of news your child watches. Talking to your child about what she watches or hears will help her put frightening information into a more balanced and reasonable context. If you allow your child to watch the news, experts suggest that you:

- **Monitor your child’s TV watching, and his response.** If it is causing him to have less concentration, trouble with sleep or agitation, then that is a clue that limiting the amount of news or eliminating it altogether might be helpful.
- **Watch the news with your child and talk about what she is seeing on television.** For example, explain to a young child that despite seeing an event, over and over on television, that this was a single incident on one day.

Mr. Paul points out that you can help normalize the coverage of events: “Be honest—don’t

give a false impression because when parents are scared, children know it. We can share our feelings and give them a framework for coping with them—for example, if your family believes in a ‘higher-being,’ say ‘We can pray that things work out for the best and people will be safe.’”

- **Put the news into context.** “The news media is trying to catch our attention so they magnify the issues,” says Mr. Paul. “Remind your child that there are a lot of good things going on in the world that don’t make the news.” Also, explain that there are many good people working to keep them safe.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions.** Your child may have irrational fears after watching a news report because he misunderstood something. If he shares those fears or asks clarifying questions, you can help alleviate his anxiety.
- **Redirect your child's attention to more positive activities.** Mr. Paul encourages parents to get their children outside to play, for both their physical and mental health. “Besides being a distraction from the anxiety of what’s on the news, physical activity itself can decrease anxiety,” he says.

Seeking help

Be alert to signs of anxiety:

- Excessive worry
- Feeling keyed up, restless or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating or mind goes blank
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbances (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or having restless, unsatisfying sleep)

Keep in mind that some of these symptoms may be natural to have right after a disaster, especially with intense media coverage. However, if these symptoms persist and your own ways of lessening the impact of symptoms are not successful, consider seeking some additional support.

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