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## OHEL Provides Guidelines & Recommendations to Adults and Children in Wake of Pittsburgh Tragedy

We are all devastated by the news of the tragic shooting that occurred yesterday in Pittsburgh.

The violence and carnage alone is distressing, but complicated further by a reminder of the presence of dangerous hatred and prejudice.

OHEL Children's Home and Family Services' Trauma Team, led by Dr. Norman Blumenthal, the OHEL Zachter Family Chair in Trauma and Crisis Response, and Tzivy Reiter, OHEL Director, has broad experience in responding to meet the immediate and long terms needs of those traumatized by such events. We provide diverse assistance, from on-the-ground support, community-wide conference calls, and personalized consultation. With a long-standing commitment to assuaging trauma and distress particularly to our children, we are providing the below practical steps to help mitigate the trauma of this catastrophe – which in todays' world, affects us all.

***When tragedy touches our community, it affects all of us. It can make both children and adults feel vulnerable and confused by events that are so devastating and impossible to understand. It may trigger memories of other tragic situations that similarly affected the community or losses that people may have experienced in the past. Everyone reacts differently to a trauma, and there is no right or wrong way to react. Individual reactions will vary and are based on a variety of factors including relative exposure to the event, relationship to the people most profoundly affected, personality, characteristics, past exposure to trauma and level of support available. Here are some guidelines below to help both children and adults cope in the aftermath of this tragedy.***

- All feelings are legitimate. There is no right or wrong to react to hearing such painful news. Some people will feel increased agitation, and other people may withdraw emotionally. Common reactions are fear, sadness, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and difficulty focusing.
- Since everybody reacts differently, people close to you may not react as you do. It's important to respect everybody's coping style. When looking for support, look for someone who you believe is able to provide the support you need.
- Most people manage to overcome these feelings without outside professional assistance. Putting feelings into words is very therapeutic. Parents can express their own feelings of sadness and grief, and encourage children to share their feelings with them in turn.

Moishe Hellman • Mel Zachter, Co-Presidents | David Mandel, Chief Executive Officer

- Despite the catastrophic nature of this attack, assure children that such assault and carnage is a rare occurrence in an otherwise safe and protected country.
- Children's coping will especially be correlated to the coping of the adults around them. Therefore, it is important for parents and teachers to pay attention to their own reactions. Young children are reading your voice, tone and body language even more than your words. Be sure you know what you want to tell them.
- Do check in with your child. Ascertain what your child knows about the situation and how that information was received.
- Do provide accurate information to children, in age-appropriate language, about what is happening.
- Do clarify what a threat is and why the recipients take such extreme action (they are evacuating in order to keep us safe)
- Do not sugar coat or hide known facts since in today's world of internet and social media everything is easily verifiable.
- Don't exaggerate the danger and risks.
- Do reassure your child that the Jewish institutions are in close contact with law enforcement to keep them safe. All criminals will be punished through the legal system.
- Do remind them that we live in blessed times and under the protection of a government that takes all threats and discrimination very seriously.
- Do limit media coverage, especially for young children, who can be easily overwhelmed by scary visual images.
- Don't assume that your child is worried. Ask them about their concerns and check in with them about how they are feeling.
- Do acknowledge your own feelings. This is validating to children and helps them label and identify their own feelings.
- Don't tell your child: "Don't be upset" or "don't cry." What is more helpful is to validate their feelings of anxiety, and ask "How can we help you feel safe?"
- Do be prepared for young children to hear information without much of a response and return even days later with concerns and questions.
- Do regulate your own feelings. Before you bring up the conversation, be sure that you are not unduly worried or upset. No matter how hard you try, your children will pick up on your anxiety and distress.

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- Do be aware that potentially scared children are as responsive to your voice tone, body language and eye contact as they are to your words. A calm but serious demeanor is part of the communication.
- Do tailor your discussion with your child to their specific history and temperament. You may want to hold discussions separately with siblings according to their age and need for information.
- Do provide activities that create opportunities for children to find meaning and mastery over the event, for example identifying good deeds that may be done, showing gratitude to law enforcement for keeping them safe, engaging in prayer, etc. You may try to engage in unstructured play or art projects with your young children to help explore their feelings or express their fears.
- Do take care of yourself. Eat right, get the sleep that you need and try not to expose yourself with so much media coverage that you become emotionally exhausted. You will be in the best position to help your child if you feel supported and strong.

## PRESCHOOL REACTIONS:

- Parents need to speak in concrete terms with pre-school aged children. They do not grasp the concept of "rare occurrences" and may need reassurance that a similar tragedy will not happen to them. Parents should show increased affection and assurance to young children during this time.
- Limit your children's exposure to media coverage and viewing that is known to only exacerbate such horror and fear.
- Young children may require extra reassurance at bedtime, a time when children's fears may emerge. Allow children to sleep in your bed, or preferably a parent should stay in their room, but do so with a pre-established time limit.
- When reassuring children be particularly cognizant of your voice tone and body language which is often more attended to at this age than your words.
- Pre-school children may demonstrate distress through play and fantasy and sometimes may develop medical complaints or misconduct as a result. Pay attention to children's play and give them room to work through their feelings through the safety of the play.
- Maintain typical routines and schedules to the extent possible as this promotes a feeling of safety and security.

## **SCHOOL-AGE REACTIONS:**

- Elementary school aged children are often preoccupied with the facts or details of such tragedy. This is age-typical and refraining from a tempered and accurate response leaves them prone to more scary rumors and distortions.
- Parents should tell children the truth about what occurred, using age appropriate and concrete language. It is difficult to hide or distort information since children have access to information and feel entitled to know. Elementary school-aged children are often interested in facts, especially boys.
- Parents should assess the need to give more information and don't answer more than what was asked by the child. Parents can also answer questions by saying "I don't know."
- Elementary school-aged children understand the concepts of a "rare occurrence" and understand death. The message you want to give them is that what happened is rare.
- Limit your child's exposure to media around the tragedy.
- Don't worry if your child does not seem to be having a reaction. Everyone reacts differently and it doesn't mean your child doesn't care.
- Assure your child that the alleged perpetrator has been apprehended and will assuredly be prevented from rendering any harm on others.
- Avoid references to subsets of the population that hate Jews unless they spontaneously bring it up. If they do, highlight the proportionately small numbers of such groups and individuals and the protection accorded us by our government and leaders.
- Focus on the helpers – the people who have come to rescue and respond to this tragedy: the firemen, policemen, first responders and community members who are helping the survivors.
- If the child expresses concern about his or her own house of worship, point out, if applicable, concrete measures your institution and community are taking to insure everyone's safety

## **ADOLESCENT REACTIONS:**

- In addition to the above, themes of “why do bad things happen to good people,” may emerge, especially with adolescents. The right to have these questions should be validated and adults can agree that we don’t understand G-d’s ways.
- Adolescents may empathize with the suffering of the victims, and may do so especially in groups of peers. They may also have a contagious response that may need to be contained.
- Adolescents can more readily integrate an awareness of minority subgroup who harbor hatred and violence in the context of a broader society that is law abiding and free of radical prejudice. With them, you can in more forthright fashion discuss this painful reality but in the context of general civility of our country.

## **RISK FACTORS:**

- The closer a child is to the event the greater is the likelihood of an untoward response. For example, a child with relatives in Pittsburgh will be more prone to fear and concern
- A child who by nature is very inquisitive and interested in news events, may be more prone to consider and even internalize many of the frightening and foreboding aspects of such events.
- Children who are generally beset by anxiety or fears are also more at risk for an adverse response.
- Anyone who has been a victim of violence or has a close relative or friend who has been in some way or another assaulted, may be prone to more distress..
- All of these children deemed more at risk should be carefully observed for changes in their mood, behavior and even play. Such responses can even occur weeks later after a dormant period of calm.
- In such instances, professional assistance should be sought.

## **FUNERALS, SHIVA & ACCOMPANYING RITUALS**

- It is generally felt that children 8 and older can go to a funeral. Ages 6-8 depends on maturity and closeness.
- One should prepare children for what they will see- especially caskets and outpourings of grief. The child should be accompanied by "dispensable adult" at a funeral – who is not himself a mourner, is totally focused on the needs and reactions of the child, and who can leave with the child if necessary.
- Don't run away from mourners or treat them differently if you meet them on the street. Greet them normally and warmly. The relationship post trauma should be commensurate with the relationship before the trauma.
- It is especially important to continue to talk about those who passed away, because a family member's greatest fear is that their loved ones will be forgotten.

*The coming days, weeks and months ahead will be difficult ones for family, friends and community members affected by this tragedy. Take good care of yourself – by eating a balanced diet, maintaining a proper sleep schedule, and soliciting support from family and friends. OHEL's trained trauma team professionals are available to assist you - to answer questions, support you and/or your children, or provide a listening ear. Please don't hesitate to contact Tziviy Reiter at OHEL at 1-800-603-OHEL.*