



How to Talk to Teens about Traumatic Events

A Guide for Club Staff

8 Steps to Addressing Traumatic Events

1. **Process your own emotions:** Label your own emotions and use self-care strategies - teens will look to you as role models for how to cope with these incidents
2. **Initiate dialogue:** Show teens that you understand what is going on and are here to support them by bringing up difficult topics
3. **Address the incident directly:** To get the dialogue started, ask teens what they have heard and what they know about the incident
4. **Show willingness to answer questions:** Teens will feel more comfortable discussing the incident if they know you are willing to answer questions and listen to their concerns
5. **Validate & listen to feelings:** Ask teens to share their feelings about the incident, and respond with empathy as validation that you are listening
6. **Revisit your Club's safety procedures:** Practice and discuss your Club's safety procedures to help teens feel safe knowing there is a plan in place for emergencies
7. **Continue to check in:** Check back in regularly during the coming weeks to see how teens are coping with and processing the incident
8. **Look for solutions:** Teens are action-oriented - ask, "What can we do to create positive change in our Club, school, or community?" and support them in starting a meaningful project or campaign

For more information and resources to help your Club support grieving youth and families, check out BGCA's Be There initiative at [BGCA.net/BeThere](https://www.bgca.net/BeThere)

Self-Care Tips

Your emotions matter too – especially when teens are looking to you as a role model for how to cope with traumatic incidents. Below are some physical and emotional self-care tips that you can use for yourself and with teens.

Physical Self-Care

After a traumatic incident, it's important to keep your body healthy and strong. You may be healing from injuries or feeling emotionally drained. Good physical health can support you through this time. Think about a time when you felt physically healthy, and consider asking yourself the following questions:

- How were you sleeping?
 - Did you have a sleep ritual or nap pattern that made you feel more rested?
- What types of food were you eating?
 - What meals made you feel healthy and strong?
- What types of exercise did you enjoy?
 - Were there any particular activities that made you feel more energized?
- Did you perform certain routines?
 - Were there activities you did to start the day off right or wind down at the end of the day?

Emotional Self-Care

Emotional self-care means different things to different people. The key to emotional self-care is being in tune with yourself. Think about a time when you felt balanced and grounded, and consider asking yourself the following questions:

- What fun or leisure activities did you enjoy?
 - Were there events or outings you looked forward to?
- Did you write down your thoughts in a journal, notebook, or blog?
- Were meditation or relaxation activities a part of your regular schedule?
- What inspirational words were you reading?
 - Did you have a favorite author or favorite website to go to for inspiration?
- Who did you spend time with?
 - Was there someone, or a group of people, that you felt safe and supported around?
- Where did you spend your time?
 - Was there a special place, maybe outdoors or at a friend's house, where you felt comfortable and grounded?

Source: RAINN – www.rainn.org

Initiating Dialogue

Address the Incident Directly

Show teens that you understand what is on their mind and are here to support them by initiating dialogue about the incident. Don't wait for teens to come to you to strike up conversation, instead ask them direct questions such as:

- "Tell me what you've heard about [the incident]?"
- "What do you know about [the incident] that took place this week?"
- "What have you seen or heard about [the incident] on the news or on social media?"

Show Willingness to Answer Questions

It is important for teens to know that you are here to support them and that they view you as a resource. Make sure to show willingness to talk and answer questions about the incident by saying things such as:

- "I am here to talk and answer any questions you may have about [the incident]."
- "I know that this is an upsetting time for many of you, please know I am here to answer any questions or concerns you have about [the incident]."
- "Does anyone have any questions about what happened during [the incident]?"

Validate and Listen to Feelings

Ask teens to share their feelings about the incident, and respond with empathy. It is also important to respond with validation that you are listening, without directly telling them how they should feel or that you know how they feel. Here are some helpful prompts:

- "It sounds like you are feeling [sad/upset/scared] about this [incident]."
- "Do you feel safe at school, the Club, and our community? What is it that you're worried about?"

It is important to validate why teens are feeling the way they are – if we just discount their feelings with throwaway statements such as "You are going to be fine" or "I know how you feel," we shut down the conversation and teens may no longer feel safe bringing up their emotions.

Sources: SAMHSA – www.samhsa.gov; The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley - <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>; Orange County Department of Education - <http://ocde.us/Pages/Home.aspx>

Emotional Check-in Activities

Internal Weather Report

Have everyone stand or sit in a circle. Ask the group, “If your mood were the weather, what would it be?” For example, if you’re angry it could be a thunderstorm, or if you’re happy it could be sunny. Give everyone a chance to think, then go around the circle and have everyone share with the group. They can choose to explain and elaborate on their feelings, or not.

Feelings 1-10

Have everyone stand or sit in a circle. Ask the group, “Rank your mood today on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the worst mood and 10 being the best.” Give everyone a chance to think, then go around the circle and have everyone share with the group. They can choose to explain and elaborate on their ranking, or not.

Pop Culture

Have everyone stand or sit in a circle. Ask the group, “If your current mood were a song or movie, what would it be?” For example, if you’re having a great day your song could be “Happy” by Pharrell, or if you’re tired your movie could be “Sleepless in Seattle”. Give everyone a chance to think, then go around the circle and have everyone share with the group. They can choose to explain and elaborate on their feelings, or not.

Highs & Lows

Have everyone stand or sit in a circle. Ask the group to think of their “high and low” of the day – this is the best thing that happened to them during the day, and the worst thing that happened to them. Give everyone a chance to think, then go around the circle and have everyone share with the group. They can choose to explain and elaborate on their day and feelings, or not.

Rose, Bud, Thorn

Have everyone stand or sit in a circle. Ask the group to think of their “rose, bud, and thorn” of the day – this is the best thing that happened to them during the day (rose), something they’re looking forward to (bud), and the worst thing that happened to them today (thorn). Give everyone a chance to think, then go around the circle and have everyone share with the group. They can choose to explain and elaborate on their day and feelings, or not.

For more reflection and check-in ideas, check out the YDToolbox app available in the App Store

Teen Activism Project Ideas

Below are some ideas of solution-oriented projects or campaigns that teens can start in response to traumatic events:

- Start a social media campaign
- Start an awareness building campaign on a topic of interest (gun control, mental health, law enforcement, etc.)
- Organize and host a peaceful march or protest
- Start a policy reform campaign for your Club, school, community, or state
- Organize and host a speaker series for your Club or community
- Start a letter-writing campaign to local or national politicians
- Organize and host a debate to get people talking about current events
- Attend city or school council meetings
- Write an opinion piece for a local newspaper or magazine
- Create educational pamphlets and flyers to distribute at your Club, school, or in your community
- Host a fundraising event and donate proceeds to a local or national activism cause