

Creating Safety in the Midst of Fear

By Elaine Tiller, Bereavement Coordinator, Montgomery Hospice

The random killings in our Washington metropolitan area over the last two weeks have created a heightened sense of insecurity, fear, vulnerability, anxiety and stress, particularly when we are outside. Our environment, which usually seems safe and reasonable, has been changed. Adult or child, we are all affected by these changes and the myriad of feelings that swirl around inside of us at a rapid rate. We all long to return to a sense of safety and stability that has been taken away by these random acts of violence.

What we all need, and especially children need, in the middle of trying to understand and deal with these times of trauma and fear, is an emotionally and physically safe place. Parents and guardians have the responsibility to create these safe places. Our homes especially must become ***safe places*** to be.

Creating a safe place at home does not mean hiding from the reality of the killings in our community. Rather it means creating the environment where we can talk safely about what we are feeling--children can ask their questions, can feel their fears, express them and be heard. Parents do not create this safe place by having all of the answers, but by sharing the answers they do have. Parents can acknowledge the fears and the sadness, and be honest when they don't have an answer. It is okay for grown-ups to still be learning and growing too, and not have every answer.

What parents can do to create a safe home:

1. Be honest. Share the feelings that you have and ask your children to share their feelings. If you have special requests of your children for the coming days, tell them what they are and say why you need these things.
2. Hold your children--be free with hugs, touch and kisses. Also ask your children for hugs, touch, and kisses.
3. When you feel that you and your children have had enough input from the radio and TV, tell your children and tell them that you are turning it off so that you can all have a break and do some other things to help find solace, safety and renewal. Listen to music together, play a game together, do some crafts together.
4. Try to keep to your family's rhythm and schedules--this is always reassuring to children. Eat at the normal time, go to bed at the regular time, etc. This helps them to know that even though abnormal things have happened, their lives remain the same.

5. Give your children toys and tools to act out events that they are worried about. Give them dolls, drawing materials, crayons, paints, make puppets, etc. to act out what they are feeling and what they believe has happened. The more children can tell their internal stories of what has happened, the freer they will be of the fears and leftover effects.
6. Do not excuse bad behavior on the basis that your child is upset and thus it is okay to act it out on others. Rather maintain rules and expectations as normal. This way your children will learn that even though things outside may not be normal, inside the home, rules and ways of relating are normal and that fear does not give us special rights to act out and hurt others. You will communicate that sharing and talking are the way to handle our fears and anxieties rather than acting out.
7. Continue to take part in family rituals. If you take part as a family in faith tradition rituals then be sure to continue these now. Perhaps there are neighborhood groups that meet periodically and have their own rituals, such as eating together. You may want to create new rituals to strengthen your family. Before or after dinner each evening try lighting a candle and talking about the things that happened to each person that day that worried them and things that made them feel good. It can be a simple ritual, but very important to the well-being of the family.

We can turn this horrible period in our area into good opportunities for our families. We can take the fear, the chaos, the craziness and use it to strengthen ourselves, our children, our families and our communities.

For further tips on helping children handle disaster-related anxiety check the website for the National Mental Health Association: <http://www.nmha.org/reassurance/children.cfm>