



Helping Youth to Cope with 4th of July Celebrations After a Shooting

The Fourth of July holiday typically includes picnics, gatherings, and fireworks. For individuals who have experienced a shooting, the holiday may remind them of what they went through. This resource offers strategies for supporting youth who recently experienced a shooting.

Identify Possible Reminders

Anything that reminds a person of the danger they went through may cause strong emotional, body-based reactions (e.g., heart rate increases when hearing loud noises like fireworks). Below are possible reminders that are common on the 4th of July.

- Sound of fireworks: May cause increase startle or feeling jumpy.
- Smell of smoke from grilling or fireworks: May remind youth of the gunshots.
- Crowds and people moving quickly: May remind youth of trying to run away or of crowds that gathered during and after the shooting.
- Friends and families together or people enjoying themselves: May remind youth of those they were worried about or those that worried about them during the shooting.

Strategies for Coping with Reminders

1. These Reactions are Understandable: Adults can help youth appreciate that their reactions make sense given what they have been through. Below are things that we can say:

- “You went through something really scary and awful; it makes sense that you feel this way.”
- “If you get scared, this is OK and expected. This doesn’t mean something is wrong with you. It is a way your brain helps to protect you from danger or a serious situation.”
- “Hearing fireworks may not be as fun as it was before the shooting because it may remind you of the shooting.”
“It may be hard to be around others who are having fun when you feel sad or scared.”

2. Notice What is Happening in Your Body: Adults can help youth attend to their thoughts and body-based reactions by saying: “You may notice that . . .

- Your body is on high alert, and you feel unsafe.
- You feel jumpy or have problems paying attention.
- You feel irritable or have a lot of feelings in your body.
- Your heart is beating faster than usual.
- You feel shaky or panicked.
- You may be thinking about aspects of the shooting.
- You have a strong wish to run from the situation that’s causing distress.

3. Your Body is Trying to Keep You Safe: Adults can help youth understand that their bodies remember danger and are reacting this way to help them stay safe. You may say:

- “This is how our brains protect us from danger. After a shooting, our brains and bodies are working overtime to alert us to any dangers out there.”
- “Your body is ready to move to protect you by wanting to get to a safer situation.”

4. These Reactions Can Be Managed:

- Let youth know they have support: “You are not alone. I am here for you.”
- Let youth know they will not always have these reactions: “Right now things are really hard. It will not always feel this way. Some things will get better. Other things will still be hard but might not be as hard as they are right now.”



- Remind youth that they are not currently in danger: “Although you feel scared, you are not in danger. Right now, you are safe.”
- Understand that children, especially those under age 8, may have less control over their responses and may react strongly despite caregivers’ attempts to help. Your patience and reassurance are key: “Your body still feels scared. It takes a while to feel safe, and that’s ok.”
- Validate their fears so they feel heard and will continue to share their feelings with you: “It takes time. When you feel this way, know that I am here for you. We can talk or just sit together.”
- Some children may want to establish a secret sign or code word so they can more privately let you know that they feel unsafe and need extra care: “If we are with others and you need me to know that you are not feeling ok, what can you do or say so that I will know that you need my support or that you might want to leave together?”

5. Discuss What Might Help Them Feel Calm: Adults can talk with youth and make a list together.

Here are some suggestions.

- Reducing their heart rates by holding their hand or putting your arm around their shoulder.
- Feeling your love by giving a back rub or doing their hair.
- Getting reassurance from you and others that they are safe right now.
- Taking slow breaths together.
- Repeating a mantra together (e.g., “My body is remembering what happened, and right now I am safe.” “My family is with me. I am not alone.”).
- Doing an activity to help focus their mind on the present moment (e.g., listening to music, watching a movie, playing sports).
- Adding your own ideas and seeking professional support if additional strategies are needed.

6. Plan for the 4th: Now (a couple of weeks prior to the 4th) is the time to discuss ways to cope with the 4th of July festivities.

- Adults can help youth recover by protecting them from being exposed to reminders (e.g., crowds, fireworks) if they do not want to participate in any community events. Let them know this is understandable.
- Find ways to limit exposure to the sound of fireworks (e.g., keep earplugs or headphones around during the event, watch fireworks on television with the sound off, watch movies with noise cancelling headphones).
- Create a new way to celebrate the holiday (e.g., going camping or to a rural area that may not have fireworks).
- Discuss with adolescents’ additional ways to keep them safe (e.g., spend time with supportive friends, consider not driving).
- Find time for your youth to recover if triggered by any aspect of the holiday. Let their minds and bodies calm with some quiet time, especially before bed.
- Address sleep concerns: Children may not want to sleep alone, especially if there are fireworks; consider if this is a good time for a family sleepover. Otherwise, consider a special bedtime routine to help them feel safer. Discuss ‘before bedtime’ strategies in the days leading up to the 4th to give them a sense of control and increase calm (e.g., slow breathing, listening to music).
- Anticipate unexpected fireworks: Talk together about the possibility that others may set off fireworks during the weeks before and after the 4th of July. Practice your coping plan: 1) Explain again why they may feel jumpy when they hear fireworks; 2) Remind them that they are currently safe; and 3) Use strategies for calming their bodies.

7. Honor Your Actions: As a family, honor how you were able to handle the 4th of July.

- Highlight how your family worked to support each other.
- Emphasize that healing involves being able to accept and share your reactions and feelings with each other, so that you are not alone with your feelings.
- Identify strategies that helped family members feel calmer and more connected.
- Think about any new traditions you started this year that you might want to do as a family in the future.