Media Coverage of Traumatic Events

Many people find it hard to resist news of traumatic events, such as disasters and terrorist attacks. As awful as it is to watch and read about, many still cannot turn away. Why is this kind of news so hard to resist? Some say it is because people are trying to inform themselves, to be prepared in case of future disaster or attacks. Others say that people are watching and reading news in an effort to understand and process the event. Still others say the media is trying to draw you in with exciting images almost like those from an action movie. Whatever the reason, we need to understand the effects that this type of news exposure may have.

Watching traumatic news is related to stress

Research tells us there is a link between watching news of traumatic events, such as terrorist attacks, and stress symptoms. It could be that watching television of the event makes people worse. It could also be that people who have more severe stress reactions are the ones who choose to watch more television about the event. Here are some examples that show the link:

- Research after the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks found that in the first few days, adults watched an average of 8 hours of television related to the attacks. Children watched an average of 3 hours of television related to the attacks. Older teens watched more than younger children. In both children and adults, those who watched the most coverage had more stress symptoms than those who watched less.

- The Oklahoma City bombing was also widely covered in the news. In adults, watching bomb-related news did not relate to increased PTSD symptoms. On the other hand, children who watched more bomb-related news did have more PTSD symptoms. Of note, for most Oklahoma school children in the weeks after the bombing, the bulk of their television viewing was bomb-related. Links were seen between PTSD symptoms and bomb-related television for children who did and did not lose a close family member in the bombing.

- In Israel, those who watched television clips of terrorism reported feeling more anxiety than those who watched clips that were not related to terrorism.

- Adults who lost close friends or family in the Mount St. Helens tragedy said that the news coverage made it harder for them to recover. Adults who only lost property said that the news neither hurt nor helped them.

- Children from Kuwait had increased PTSD symptoms after viewing gruesome televised images of violence and death related to the Gulf War.

It is still unclear why this relationship exists. Media might both hurt and help those who experience trauma. Having news media present is sometimes a burden on family members. For example, the media may show their personal grief on television. Also, watching news about a trauma may make the victims feel even more helpless. It may fix even more firmly in their minds the images of death and damage.

Positive role of the media

Although there may be negative effects, clearly the media plays a vital role after a disaster. The
media provides needed information and alerts. Media outlets can direct the public to services for victims and their families. They are a resource for the community. They can also be a source of hope. In some ways, being involved with the media might give survivors a sense of power. This could help offset their feeling helpless after the trauma.

Recommendations about viewing
You may want to limit the amount and type of news you are viewing if you:

- Feel anxious or stressed after watching a news program
- Cannot turn off the television
- Cannot take part in relaxing or fun activities
- Have trouble sleeping

Some useful tips include:

- Do not watch the news just before bed.
- Read newspapers or magazines rather than watching television.
- Inform yourself by talking to other people about the attack.

Children
The research with children shows even more clearly that watching too much trauma-related television can be harmful. Here are some tips for dealing with children and media exposure:

- **Be aware** that children in the household may be exposed to traumatic images. It is common for a television to be on for several hours a day in an American household. Adults should be aware of how much news a child is viewing. This may occur even if no adult has decided that the child can watch trauma-related news.

- **Parents should talk with the child** about what they are seeing on the news. For example, children who watched news about the September 11th attacks may have seen the first plane crash into the building over and over again. These children may have needed it explained to them that they were seeing one single crash that happened on one day, not multiple crashes.

- **Put the news into context.** Explain that:
  - There are many good people who will do their best to keep them safe if something bad happens. Focus on the firemen and rescue teams and not just on the attack.
  - The news often tells us bad things that happen in the world. Most of the time, though, the country is safe. Most people who fly in airplanes land safely on the ground and have no problems at all.

- **Invite children to talk.** Above all, parents need to allow and even invite children to ask questions. Children may have misplaced fears after watching a news report. This may be because they did not understand something. If the child shares those fears or asks questions, parents can help explain and comfort. Parents can tell the child that a lot of people are working hard to make things safer for the future.

- **Limit the child’s news viewing.** Some parents do not allow young children to watch the news at all. If news viewing is allowed, experts suggest that parents watch the news WITH their children. Also, if a child seems to be watching too much trauma-related news, the parent can direct the child to other more positive activities.

Sadly, it is true that most reported news is bad news. We don't hear about the planes that landed safely every day. Children need to be reminded that what they see on the news does not reflect the way things are most often in our country.
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