



Talking about traumatic events

Supporting autistic people with intellectual disability after a traumatic event, such as a gun incident, involves focusing on safety, clear communication, maintaining routine, and allowing space for emotional processing.

Every person has a different awareness of terrorism so we should not assume knowledge. It is important to ask what they have heard or know about gun violence in our community or from others. Be sure to validate their thoughts and feelings and reassure them that they are safe.

Allow them time to process information and express themselves in their own way. This may include the use of AAC devices and/or visual cues. Consider using a social story to help them understand what they are feeling and that what they are feeling is okay, and that they are safe.

General principles for support:

- Prioritise safety and control
 - Help the person feel safe
 - Emphasise what others are doing to keep them safe
 - Offer concrete coping strategies- e.g. "if you are feeling worried, you can come to me or use your fidget toys"
- Maintain routine
 - Autistic people often rely on routines for stability
 - Continue with normal routines
 - Use a visual timetable to explain any changes to routine
- Validate feelings
 - Acknowledge the person's feelings and discomfort
 - Autistic people may express distress through behaviours (e.g. stimming, meltdowns, withdrawal) rather than words
 - Use creative avenues (e.g. painting, drawing, art, puppets) or sensory tools to help them share their thoughts and feelings
- Limit media exposure
 - Turn off the television/radio. Limit your own exposure as well. People can become more distressed with nonstop exposure to media coverage
 - Limit conversations about the event in front of the person with the exception of validating feelings and concerns

Talking about the incident:

- Use simple, concrete language
 - Avoid idioms, euphemisms, or graphic details
 - Use direct and clear language appropriate for their developmental level
- Use visual supports or a social story
- Provide facts, not fiction
- Ask what the person knows
 - This provides the chance to correct misinformation and provides the opportunity to address specific concerns

Use simple and direct language:

The following is a suggestion for language to be used based on different developmental levels. This can be changed or updated to what the person is concerned about.

Plain English *"Gun violence happens when a person uses a gun to hurt and/or kill another person. This can happen at school, in public places in our community, or at someone's house. Using a gun to hurt and/or kill another person is a crime. Community helpers like police work together to try and create a community safe from gun violence."*

Where to get help:

- GP or health professionals
- Crisis lines
 - Lifeline: 13 11 14
 - Beyond Blue: 1300 22 46 36
 - Headspace (ages 12–25) – 1800 650 890

Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with the person's abilities to function or if you are worried, contact local mental health professionals who have expertise in trauma.

Resources:

<https://blueknot.org.au/>

<https://stride.com.au/>

<https://idmhconnect.health/i-am-professional/working-diverse-groups/people-who-have-experienced-trauma>