Talking with someone after a traumatic event

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This session we have been focusing on how to talk with people after traumatic, stressful events. Having these conversations can be hard on *both* parties. It is normal to feel anxious about having heavy conversations with someone. It is hard to know what to say (or NOT say!) Sometimes we need more guidance and tips than just being a good "listener"
Talking to someone after a traumatic event requires sensitivity, empathy, and respect. The goal is to create a safe and supportive environment where the individual feels heard and understood.

Below are some tangible tips for having such conversations:

1. Ensure Privacy
• Choose a quiet, private space: Make sure the conversation takes place in a calm, secure setting where the person feels comfortable and there are no distractions. (*Put away your phone or any other distractions!)*

2. Be Present and Listen Actively
• Listen without judgment: Avoid interrupting or offering solutions unless the person asks for advice. Your role is to listen and validate their feelings, not to fix the situation.
• Show empathy: Use active listening techniques like nodding, maintaining eye contact, and paraphrasing what they say to show you are fully engaged. For example, "That sounds really overwhelming, I can't imagine what you're going through."
• Acknowledge their feelings: Be sure to affirm their emotions and let them know that it's okay to feel whatever they're feeling. Phrases like, "It's understandable that you're feeling this way" or "It makes sense that you would be upset," can help them feel validated.

3. Avoid Minimizing or Over-Explaining
• Don't minimize their experience: Avoid saying things like, "At least it wasn't worse" or "It could have been worse." These statements can invalidate their feelings and make them feel dismissed.
• Avoid offering unsolicited advice or explanations: Resist the urge to immediately try to offer solutions or tell them how to cope unless they ask for advice. Sometimes, simply being there and listening is the most helpful thing.

4. Be Patient and Give Them Time
• Allow silence: If the person struggles to find the words, be patient. Sometimes they may need a moment to collect their thoughts, and silence can be comforting. Be ok sitting with silence. Let the person talk at their own pace.

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5. Respect Their Autonomy

• Let them lead the conversation: Allow them to decide what and how much they want to share. Don't press for details, especially graphic ones.

6. Offer Reassurance Without Dismissing Their Pain

• Avoid clichés or false reassurance: Phrases like "Everything happens for a reason" or "You'll be fine" can sound dismissive. Instead, reassure them that it's normal to have a range of emotions after trauma and that healing is a process.

• Normalize their experience: Remind them that trauma affects people in different ways, and there's no "right" or "wrong" way to feel or respond.

7. Encourage Professional Support If Needed

• Offer to help them find resources or support, but respect their decision if they are not ready to seek help.

8. Follow Up

• Check in periodically: After the initial conversation, follow up to see how they're doing. This shows that you care and that you are there for them, not just in the immediate aftermath, but in the ongoing recovery process. Understand that trauma affects each person differently. Some may want to talk about it, while others may need space. Let them lead the process based on what feels comfortable for them.

References:

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/coping-with-traumatic-events

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