

# Let's Talk:

## When your family is touched by tragedy

*Presenter – Ken Ferguson, Clinical Counselor*

Hi, my name is Ken. Let's talk a little bit about what happens when there's a tragedy in your family. Major tragedies that happen, leaders will bring in counselors to help people manage what's happened. The Sandy Hook tragedy or the shootings in Orlando, for example, they bring in counselors. And even companies, when someone dies or there's a critical incident, there's an accident in the factory, they often bring counselors in to talk about what happened and to help people debrief what's happened.

### Critical incidents impact the family

But when something happens in your family, like a sickness or a death or a car accident, people don't often understand that that's a critical incident that happens in your whole family, and it happens to everyone. It could be a layoff or a lost job or some kind of legal problem. Anything that leads family members to be anxious and have questions is a reason to circle the wagons and to bring people together to get support together and to support each other as you process what's happened.

### Connect for support

So it really is important that you bring everyone together. Meet with everyone if possible and Skype<sup>1</sup> if you need to. It's important that nobody feels left out. And give as much as structure to people as is possible. Sometimes when little kids are involved, you don't wanna give too much information, but you wanna let everyone know what's happening and that you're gonna work together to get from where you are to where you're gonna be. Encourage questions. Take them seriously. Write them down and promise to get answers if possible if you don't know the answers to all the questions.

### Open communication

So it's really important to make sure the doors of communication left open. Not all the questions are gonna come in the first meeting, so you want people to know that it's askable. If things come up later, they can ask about the questions later. Let people know that the conversation is open any time. And keeping the feeling secret and keeping isolated doesn't help at all, so draw people out. Let

them know that it's important to express feelings, sadness, anger, worry, all those kinds of things, so that the family can work together to overcome what's happened.

## **Additional help**

And I wanna encourage you to consider to get professional help. A professional counselor or maybe a religious leader could be helpful as well. If the event affects a family member, be sensitive to the fact that they may feel like they're the identified problem that gets sent away for help. Perhaps the whole family will benefit from meeting with a professional at least one time, and then others may need more help individually or together.

## **Heal over time**

So lastly I want you to be aware that people heal and respond to difficult events in different ways and at different rates. Some traumatic deaths can take 24 months or longer to process, so be patient with yourself and with others. And some people may benefit from medication or psychiatric evaluation to overcome situational depression or anxiety that can result from what's happened. So don't be afraid to get help when somebody needs it.

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