



The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

PROTECTING PERSONAL AND FAMILY SAFETY: *Responding to Threatening Situations*

Though we may usually feel safe most of the time, threats inevitably occur. Experiencing a threat is a frightening and undermines our sense of safety. Feeling threatened can cause us to isolate ourselves and, ultimately, take actions that may not be helpful. Knowing what to do when we feel threatened can help us respond more effectively to make safer and healthier choices for ourselves and our families.

Knowing what to do when we feel threatened can help us respond more effectively to make safer and healthier choices for ourselves and our families.

Possible Threats and Normal Reactions

Threats may occur in a variety of ways such as stalking, bullying, or being targeted by terrorists. People can also act in threatening ways by using excessive eye contact, aggressive facial expressions, positioning themselves in overly close proximity, or other behaviors that violate social norms. Threats can be made verbally, through email or other electronic communication, letters left at someone's home or place of work, or other means. They may involve imminent danger or simply the possibility of danger.

Personal threats directed at an individual are often more stressful than more general threats that might impact a large or more random group of people. It is normal to experience fear when we feel threatened. Being threatened or feeling threatened breaches our usual feeling of safety, which may continue until we feel that normal protections are back in place. Fear associated with a threat can persist and recovering a sense of safety is important to help function more effectively.

How to Respond to Threats

When we sense a threat, knowing how to manage our feelings and what actions to take can help families feel safer. Below are some things you can do to help your family feel safer when you experience a threat:

- Remember that threats are common and most people around the world experience threats at some point in their lives. Knowing that others have managed threatening situations can give us hope.
- Understand normal reactions to threats, which include: feeling fear, being easily distracted or preoccupied, having troublesleeping, experiencing a desire to react by running away, fighting back or simply feeling frozen or unable to act.
- In general it is best to avoid directly confronting someone or something that seems threatening. Confrontation can escalate a situation and can put you and your family at increased risk.
- Notify law enforcement if you are threatened. They are trained to respond and manage threats and can provide helpful support and information.
- If threats occur in school, in addition to law enforcement, notify your child's teacher and principal or other designated individuals. School personnel can help address threats that may distract from the learning environment.
- If you are in the military or other structured organization with a chain of command, in addition to law enforcement, notify your leadership of threats to you or your family. Leaders can provide helpful guidance and support.
- Talk with your spouse and/or children about the threat and how to respond. This helps the family feel more connected.
- Ensure your family has a means of quickly and easily communicating during threatening situations; being able to connect with family is important.
- Consider traveling in pairs or a larger group while there is an active threat. Being with others helps people feel safe and supported.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to manage stress or worry. If your stress feels too high, call your primary care provider to discuss safe options for helping you feel calmer.

Continued

- Avoid simple reassurance like “everything will be okay”, making promises you cannot keep, telling people what they should feel, or forcing people to talk who are not

ready. These can undermine trust and social connection and increase peoples’ stress and worry.



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
4301 Jones Bridge Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-4799
www.CSTSONline.org | cstsinfo@usuhs.mil

