



**Cuyahoga County
Community Mental Health Board**

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State and County Mental Health Authorities Advise Families on Coping with Tragedy

Cuyahoga County, Ohio – “How could this have happened?’ is a question that rightly comes to mind when tragedy, such as Wednesday’s school shooting and suicide at Cleveland’s SuccessTech Academy, occurs,” stated William M. Denihan, Chief Executive Officer of the Cuyahoga County Community Mental Health Board (CCCMHB).

Denihan says that this incident impacts every person in our community and the public is looking for answers as to why and how a child could be so distraught as to open fire on his classmates and teachers and then turn the gun on himself. “We may never know what he was thinking, or all of the circumstances that lead to this tragic outcome. However, the community can take solace in the fact that other tragedies of this nature have been prevented through a variety of community services.”

In Cuyahoga County alone, the community mental health system is treating nearly 13,000 children and youth under the age of 18 each year. Diagnoses of children can range from situational depression and anxiety to eating disorders and schizophrenia. With proper treatment children can grow normally, lead full and productive lives and tragedies can be avoided.

Denihan emphasizes that it is important for youth to report unusual activities or comments of other children to adults, and for adults to create safe and supportive environments for them to do so.

It is also important for parents and guardians to know that children can be particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety in the wake of the events and news coverage at SuccessTech Academy.

“Children and teenagers may suffer from stress and anxiety because of the recent school shooting,” said Sandra Stephenson, MSW, MA, Director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health. “People react to trauma differently, but it is important to be aware of your child’s reaction to stress and anxiety and to seek additional help if necessary.”

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Caretakers of children should be alert to signs of trouble and how to handle them. Children ages five to 11 may exhibit increased irritability, aggression, and competition with their siblings for parental attention. They may also show anxiety through whining, withdrawing from their peers, and losing interest in normal activities. Those 11 to 18 may show outright rebellion, physical problems, or sleep disturbances.

The following suggestions may help to reduce stress and anxiety in children:

- **Spend some time each day giving each child your undivided attention, even if just for a few minutes.** Share experiences, reaffirm your love, make plans together, and just “be there” for each other.
- **Encourage them to talk.** Encourage children to describe what they are feeling. Let them talk about the event and ask as many questions as they like. Listen to what they say. Include the entire family in the discussion if possible.
- **Understand their fears.** It is important that parents accept anxieties as being very real to children. Help them cope by getting them to understand what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them that everything will be all right.
- **Inform children.** Every effort should be made to keep children informed about what is happening. Explanations should be in simple language.
- **Reassure them.** Parents can help reassure children by telling them they are safe, holding and hugging them frequently, restoring normal routines, providing play experiences for them, and making bedtime a special moment of calm and comfort.
- **Encourage activities with their peers.** As with adults, social time with friends is a very important part of the recovery process.
- **Temporarily lower expectations for them.** Allow for the fact that stress can show itself in many ways over a period of time, and make appropriate allowances.

If a child does not respond to the above suggestions and is having serious reactions, seek additional help from a behavioral health professional. In Cuyahoga County call the 24-hour suicide prevention, mental health crisis and information and referral line for adults and children at 216-623-6888. The CCCMHB contracts with Mental Health Services, Inc., to provide this service to the community.

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*More information about coping with tragedy is available
on the Ohio Department of Mental Health Web site at www.mh.state.oh.us.*