

Helping children cope after a traumatic event

Parents, teachers, and others in the community can help children manage their emotional and physical reactions following trauma.

Traumatic events, such as a sudden death, natural disaster, motor vehicle accident, or terrorist attack can leave children and teens feeling stressed, frightened, and helpless. Whether they personally witness the event or are exposed to it on the news or social media, children may experience intense emotions and a heightened sense of insecurity. Children's reactions to a traumatic event depend on their age and personality, the severity of the event, the availability of support, and previous experience of trauma.

Tips for all ages

Traumatic events can disrupt children's sense of safety and result in fears and worries, nightmares, and physical reactions such as headaches, stomachaches, problems sleeping, and loss of appetite. Here are suggestions to help children through the emotional and physical challenges they may face after trauma:

- ☑ Be aware of your own reactions to the event and manage your own stress. Stay calm and offer hugs and reassurance to help restore your child's sense of safety and security.
- ☑ Share information about the event and answer your child's questions honestly. Listen to your child's fears and let him/her know it is okay to share his/her feelings at any time.
- ☑ Limit or prevent exposure to disturbing news and social media coverage of the event. Children who see graphic images or hear distressing news stories may become re-traumatized.
- ☑ Maintain stable routines as much as possible, including regular mealtimes, bedtimes, and exercise.
- ☑ Engage in fun activities to help children relax and feel that life is returning to normal.
- ☑ Watch for signs of trauma, even after weeks have passed. Children cope with trauma in different ways, and some may show signs of sadness, anxiety, and troubling behavior weeks or months after the event.

Tips by age group

Preschool age

After a traumatic event, children who are age five and under may display behavior from an earlier stage of their lives, such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, clinginess to parents, and fearfulness of strangers. They may have tantrums or cry more than usual, or become withdrawn from others.

Parents and other adults can help children by providing comfort and reassurance, maintaining routines as much as possible, encouraging them to express their feelings, and giving simple explanations to children's questions about the event. Children look to their parents for cues as to how to feel and react, and will pick up on a parent's distress or anxiety. It is best not to expose young children to the news on TV or the radio about the traumatic event.

Involving toddlers and preschoolers in fun activities and playtime with others will provide a healthy distraction.

When to get help

Be aware of signs that a child may need extra help coping with the trauma. If six weeks or more have passed since the traumatic event and your child is not feeling better, has trouble functioning at school or at home, is withdrawn from friends and family, or continues to have physical complaints such as headaches, stomach pains, and problems sleeping or eating, contact a mental health professional.

Early childhood

Children ages 6 to 11 may show some of the same reactions that younger children have, such as reverting to more childish behaviors. They may have nightmares or trouble sleeping, find it difficult to concentrate in school, become irritable, anxious or disruptive, or lose interest in family, friends, and fun activities.

Parents should reassure children that they are safe and will be taken care of no matter what. Encourage family discussion about the event and answer questions, but be careful about exposing children to news and TV footage. Keep bedtime and meal routines as normal as possible, and involve children in activities that keep them busy. Identify the positives such as community recovery activities and the ways people help each other get through difficult times.

Adolescence

Older children ages 12 – 17 may have stress reactions such as nightmares and flashbacks of the event, lose interest in school, hobbies, and friends, feel angry, guilty, or depressed, withdraw from others, have physical symptoms such as headaches, or abuse alcohol or other drugs. As with younger children, parents can help teens rebuild a sense of trust and safety by listening to their concerns without judgment and providing them with peer support opportunities. Age-appropriate volunteer activities can help teens feel useful and productive.