

Trauma and children – tips for parents

Public health information

Summary

There is a variety of things you can do to help your child or teenager recover from a distressing experience. Examples of such events can include life-threatening car accidents, bushfires, floods, sudden illness or death in the family, crime or violence. When a distressing or frightening experience occurs, time and support will help with the recovery process.

If you are concerned about your child in any way, or feel that you are not coping yourself, always seek professional advice. A good place to start is your local doctor.

Children react differently

A child's response to a distressing or frightening experience will depend on a wide range of factors including their age, stage of development and personality, and the impact of the crisis on their parents or significant others. Your child may not react in the ways you expect.

Trauma reactions may include:

- **Withdrawal** – such as loss of interest in activities, loss of confidence, not wanting to talk or regressing to more 'babyish' ways of behaving.
- **Preoccupation** – needing to relive the experience, for example, through repetitive play or drawings. The child may be overly concerned about the possibility of future events or may have nightmares.
- **Anxiety** – such as problems with concentrating or paying attention, clingy behaviour, separation anxiety, sleep problems and irritable behaviour.
- **Physical symptoms** – such as headaches and stomach aches.

Allow for a delayed reaction. Some children seem to cope well at first, but can experience reactions to the stress days, weeks or even months later.

Talk about the event

It helps to bring all the issues out in the open. Suggestions include:

- Reassure your child that the event is over and they are safe (but only if this is the case). You may have to reassure them over and over again.
- Listen to your child. Take their concerns and feelings seriously.
- Let your child know that you would like to hear about how things are for them.
- Tell your child about what happened in a way that is appropriate to their level of understanding and without going into frightening and lurid detail. Use language they understand. If you keep accurate information from them, they will fill in the blanks using their experience, available information and their imagination.
- Make sure your child hasn't jumped to any wrong conclusions. For example, younger children may think that tragedies are their fault because they were naughty or thought bad things about someone.
- Talk about the event as a family. Allow everyone to have their say, including children. This helps everyone to overcome isolation, to understand each other and to feel supported and heard.
- Talk to your child about how people may react to distress. Tell them their feelings are normal in these circumstances and reassure them that they will gradually feel better.

Your response is important

How the crisis impacts on you, and your reactions to your child's feelings and behaviour will have an enormous impact on your child's ability to cope and recover. Issues to keep in mind include:

- Be understanding. Recognise that changes in behaviour, such as tantrums or bedwetting, may be the way your child reacts to distressing or frightening events.
- Give your child extra attention, particularly at bedtime and at other times of separation, if this is an issue for them.
- Children look to their parents or carers to understand a crisis and find ways to respond and deal with it. They need the adults around them to be able to 'tune in' to their fears and distress and to comfort and support them. If you are distressed and having difficulty with your feelings, reactions or relationships, it is important to seek support and help for yourself. If you don't, the child's fear and distress will increase.
- Talk about your feelings in an appropriate way with your child and allow them to talk about theirs.
- Remember that everyone is different and may have different emotions. Don't expect your child to feel the same way you do.
- Give your child a sense of control over their life. Even minor decisions, such as allowing them to choose between two sandwich fillings at lunch, makes the child feel more in control. This is especially important after the chaos of a crisis. Children who feel helpless tend to experience more severe stress symptoms.
- Try not to be overly protective of your child. It's natural to want to keep your family members close after a crisis, but you also want them to feel that their world is a safe place to be.

Family routines

Suggestions include:

- Keep to your regular routine as much as possible. The predictability of the family's day-to-day schedule is reassuring for children.
- Reassure your child that their routine will be back to normal as soon as possible. They may not be able to manage their usual routine for a while, such as attending school or performing household chores. Don't push it.
- Don't introduce changes such as new routines or stricter standards of behaviour. Leave that for another time.
- Maintain family roles if you can. For example, don't insist that your child take on more responsibility around the house than usual or expect them to meet the emotional needs of a distressed parent.

Practical strategies

Suggestions include:

- Allow your child plenty of time to play and enjoy recreational activities such as sport, particularly favourite games and activities with 'best' and familiar friends.
- Allow time for fun. Laughter, good times and shared pleasure can help all family members to feel better.
- Don't insist on three main meals if your child's appetite is affected. If they don't feel like eating at mealtimes, offer them regular snacks throughout the day instead.
- Make sure your child gets enough rest and sleep.
- Involve them in some sort of physical exercise – it will help your child to burn off stress chemicals and improve their sleep.
- Limit stimulants like sugar, coloured foods and chocolate.
- Help your child to physically relax – warm baths, massages, story times and lots of cuddles can help relieve muscle tension.
- Intervene if an activity makes your child upset or anxious – for example, a television show that reminds the child of the trauma or promotes feelings of worry, alarm or fear. Don't be afraid to switch off the television if the program content is not supporting the child's recovery.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- Children and adults will recover from distressing or frightening experiences given time and support.
- How you deal with the crisis yourself and how you react to your child's feelings and behaviour will have an enormous impact on their ability to cope.
- Tell your child the facts about what happened, in a way that is appropriate for their level of development and using language they can understand.

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