

How to Help Your Child Following a Traumatic Event

A traumatic event is one that involves a highly stressful experience that has a negative effect on the physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing of a child.

Trauma may impact your child's natural ability to cope. The first step in helping your child cope with a traumatic situation is to recognize what a traumatic event might be. Your child may have witnessed or experienced an event in which the threat may be real or perceived. Traumatic experiences can be a single event or ongoing, and they can cause your child or family a great deal of pain.

The following events can be traumatic situations one has to deal with:

- Loss of a loved one or pet
- Divorce
- Family or friend moving away
- A relative or friend is arrested and/or incarcerated
- Emotional abuse or neglect
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Illness
- Serious accident
- Natural disaster
- Economic instability
- Threat of violence (in home or community)
- Bullying

Keep in mind that children and adults handle difficult situations in different ways. You might find that helping your child cope with a traumatic event can be both isolating and stressful for the entire family. It is important to be aware of your own past experiences since they might resurface while helping your child deal with the aftermath of their trauma. You might find that you are experiencing one or more of the following adult responses to traumatic events:

- Physical aches and pains
- Low energy or fatigue
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite
- Irritable mood, depression or anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling fearful
- Recurring and intrusive thoughts of past events
- Disturbing dreams or thoughts
- Withdrawal from others and loss of interest in activities

When helping your child cope with trauma, it is important to practice self-care for your own wellbeing, and also to help your child cope with a traumatic situation. The following may help:

- Eat well
- Get enough rest
- Make time for physical activity
- Talk to someone you trust
- Rely on humor
- Incorporate spiritual and religious beliefs

Behavioral responses to trauma that you might see in your child

5 years old or younger

- Regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, fear of the dark, clinginess or separation anxiety
- Delays in reaching developmental milestones
- Crying or frequent tantrums
- Extreme high or low energy in comparison to peers
- Sleep disturbance and nightmares
- Change in appetite

6–11 years old

- Physical aches and pains
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Irritability or increased conflicts at home and school
- Isolation or loss of interest in favorite activities
- New fears or phobias
- Personality changes
- Obsessive re-enactment of the event in art or play
- Declines in school performance and attendance
- Refusing to go to school
- Nervousness or being hypervigilant

12–17 years old

- Detachment, shame or guilt
- Changes in attitude
- Emotional numbing or apathy
- Depression
- Thoughts or comments about death and dying
- Self-destructive or reckless behavior
- Changes in interpersonal relationships
- Using drugs or alcohol and/or getting in trouble with the law
- Believing that they can take care of themselves without adult help (pseudo maturity)

Tips on Helping Your Child Cope:

Rebuilding Safety and Trust

- **Respond to your child calmly and compassionately.** Establish reasonable expectations and limitations. Avoid physical punishment.
- **Listen and validate your child's feelings.** Help them label their feelings and express their emotions. Let them express their worries or fears through journaling, drawing or play.
- **Maintain consistent routines for meals, sleep and physical activity.** This includes making sure your child attends school regularly.
- **Include your child in family decisions when possible and allow age-appropriate choices.** This fosters a sense of acceptance and control.
- **Minimize unnecessary stress at home.** Home should be a safe zone.

Building Resilience

- **Teach your child to relax.** Breathe, go for walks and listen to music.
- **Minimize media exposure.** Limit the amount of news your child watches and be available to answer questions or explain content.
- **Make family time a priority.** Be emotionally and physically available. Engage in activities you enjoy as a family.
- **Create a support system for your child and family.** Children want to know who they can depend on at home, school and in their community.
- **Answering questions.** It's ok to say "I don't know." Or "I don't have the answer, but I will get one for you."
- **Tell your child you love and care about them and want to know how they are feeling.** Remind them it's not their fault.

Restoring Hope

Provide positive experiences. Acknowledge the things they are doing well and make family plans for the future.

- **Keep promises.** Be consistent.

If symptoms persist in your child or yourself for more than a month, make an appointment with both a medical and mental health professional.