



Helping youth cope with violence and trauma

Each year, children experience violence and disaster and face other traumas. Young people are injured, they see others harmed by violence, they experience sexual abuse, and they lose loved ones or witness other tragic and shocking events. Parents and caregivers can help children overcome these experiences and start the process of recovery.

What is trauma?

Psychological trauma is an emotionally painful, shocking, stressful and sometimes life-threatening experience. It may or may not involve physical injuries, and can result from witnessing distressing events. Examples include a natural disaster, physical or sexual abuse and terrorism.

Reactions (responses) to trauma can be immediate or delayed. Reactions to trauma differ in severity and cover a wide range of behaviors and responses. Children with existing mental health problems, past traumatic experiences, and/or

limited family and social supports may be more reactive to trauma. Frequently experienced responses among children after trauma are loss of trust and a fear of the event happening again.

It's important to remember:

- Children's reactions to trauma are strongly influenced by adults' responses to trauma.
- People from different cultures may have their own ways of reacting to trauma.

Commonly experienced responses to trauma among children

Children age 5 and under may react in a number of ways including:

- Showing signs of fear
- Clinging to parent or caregiver
- Crying or screaming
- Whimpering or trembling
- Moving aimlessly
- Becoming immobile
- Returning to behaviors common to being younger
- Thumb sucking
- Bedwetting
- Being afraid of the dark

Children age 6 to 11 may react by:

- Isolating themselves
- Becoming quiet around friends, family, and teachers
- Having nightmares or other sleep problems
- Refusing to go to bed
- Becoming irritable or disruptive
- Having outbursts of anger
- Starting fights
- Being unable to concentrate
- Refusing to go to school
- Complaining of physical problems
- Developing unfounded fears
- Becoming depressed
- Expressing guilt over what happened
- Feeling numb emotionally
- Doing poorly with school and homework
- Losing interest in fun activities

Adolescents age 12 to 17 may react by:

- Having flashbacks to the event (flashbacks are the mind reliving the event)
- Having nightmares or other sleep problems

- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Using or abusing drugs, alcohol, or tobacco
- Being disruptive, disrespectful, or behaving destructively
- Having physical complaints
- Feeling isolated or confused
- Being depressed
- Being angry
- Losing interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Having suicidal thoughts

Adolescents may feel guilty. They may feel guilt for not preventing injury or deaths. They also may have thoughts of revenge.

What can parents do to help?

After violence or disaster, parents and family members should identify and address their own feelings—this will allow them to help others. Explain to children what happened and let them know:

- You love them
- The event was not their fault
- You will do your best to take care of them
- It's okay for them to feel upset

Do:

- Allow children to cry
- Allow sadness
- Let children talk about feelings
- Let them write about feelings
- Let them draw pictures about the event or their feelings

Don't:

- Expect children to be brave or tough
- Make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Get angry if children show strong emotions
- Get upset if they begin bedwetting, acting out, or thumb sucking

Other tips:

- If children have trouble sleeping, give them extra attention, let them sleep with a light on, or let them sleep in your room (for a short time).
- Try to keep normal routines, for example, reading bedtime stories, eating dinner together, watching TV together, reading books, exercising, or playing games. If you can't keep normal routines, make new ones together.
- Help children feel in control when possible by letting them choose meals, pick out clothes, or make some decisions for themselves.

How can I help young children that experienced trauma?

Helping children can start immediately, even at the scene of the event. Most children recover within a few weeks of a traumatic experience, while some may need help longer. Grief, a deep emotional response to loss, may take months to resolve. Children may experience grief over the loss of a loved one, teacher, friend, or pet. Grief may be re-experienced or worsened by news reports or the event's anniversary. Some children may need help from a mental health professional. Some people may seek other kinds of help from community leaders. Identify children that need support and help them obtain it.

Examples of problematic behaviors could be:

- Refusing to go to places that remind them of the event
- Emotional numbness
- Behaving dangerously
- Unexplained anger/rage
- Sleep problems including nightmares

Adult helpers should:

- Pay attention to children
 - Listen to them
 - Accept/do not argue about their feelings
 - Help them cope with the reality of their experiences
- Reduce effects of other stressors
 - Frequent moving or changes in place of residence
 - Long periods away from family and friends
 - Pressures to perform well in school
 - Transportation problems
 - Fighting within the family
 - Being hungry
- Monitor healing
 - It takes time
 - Do not ignore severe reactions
 - Pay attention to sudden changes in behaviors, speech, language use or strong emotions
- Remind children that adults
 - Love them
 - Support them
 - Will be with them when possible

Parents and caregivers should also limit viewing of repetitive news reports about traumatic events. Young children may not understand that news coverage is about one event and not multiple similar events.

Resources

Can Do and the Storm by Ducktor Morty, PhD. www.thecandoduck.com/can-do-and-the-storm.html

“Helping Young Children and Families Cope with Trauma” by Joy D. Osofsky, PhD. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Helping_Young_Children_and_Families_Cope_with_Trauma.pdf

“Helping Children Cope with Terrorism,” National Association of School Psychologists, www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/war-and-terrorism/helping-children-cope-with-terrorism

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<http://nctsn.org/>

Source(s)

- 1 American Academy of Pediatrics, “Providing Psychosocial Support to Children and Families in the Aftermath of Disasters and Crises.” *Pediatrics*, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2015/09/08/peds.2015-2861>; “Reactions and Guidelines for Children Following Crisis and Trauma,” Alabama Department of Mental Health
- 2 www.mh.alabama.gov/Downloads/COPI/GuidelineCrisis.pdf

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