

Young People and Traumatic Events: Information for Parents/Carers

Traumatic events can be single experiences or multiple and recurring. They can cause terror, fear, horror and helplessness.

Traumatic events may also lead to physical symptoms such as heart beating fast, strong startle responses, stomach dropping and shakiness. The impact does not simply go away when the traumatic event is over. Instead, traumatic events can change the way children, adolescents and adults see themselves and their world.

What can happen after a traumatic event?

- > **Shock** - young people may feel stunned, dazed or numb. They may cut off from their feelings, or what is going on around them.
- > **Denial** – they can't accept what has happened so they may behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think they are being strong, or the young person doesn't care about what has happened.

After the experience of a single traumatic event the feelings of shock gradually fade and other thoughts and feelings take their place. When there have been multiple traumatic events the feelings may linger.

What happens next?

People react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of feelings young people may have, including:

- > **Frightened** that the same thing will happen again, or that they might lose control of their feelings and break down.
- > **Helpless** that something really bad happened and they could do nothing about it. They may feel vulnerable and overwhelmed.
- > **Angry** about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.
- > **Guilty** that they have survived when others have suffered or died. They may feel they could have done something to prevent it.
- > **Sad** particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone they knew.
- > **Ashamed** or embarrassed that they have these strong feelings they can't control, especially if they need others to support them.
- > **Relieved** that they are out of danger.
- > **Hopeful** that their life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.



What else might you notice?

Strong feelings affect physical health. In the weeks after a traumatic event, you may notice your child or adolescent experiences:

- > Sleeplessness
- > Tiredness
- > Dreams and nightmares
- > Poor concentration
- > Memory problems
- > Difficulty thinking clearly
- > Headaches
- > Changes in appetite
- > Aches and pains
- > Heart beating faster

Helpful things you can do

You are important in helping children and adolescents to recover from their trauma-related experiences and losses. Because children and adolescents go through many *normal* changes as they mature into young adults, it is not always easy to tell when they are bothered by the experience of trauma. Here are some suggestions about ways to support your child:

- > Try to keep in mind what your child has experienced. Let your child know that you understand the seriousness of what they went through, and that you know their reactions to their experiences can continue for a long time. At the same time, try to reassure and comfort them that things will improve over time.
- > Encourage your child (when they show signs of wanting) to talk about ways in which they are still bothered by their experiences. This will help you better understand their feelings and behaviour.
- > Some young people may have difficulty finding ways to talk about the traumatic event or their feelings. Therefore, you need to be patient and available to have conversations at the young person's pace.
- > In speaking to your child, try to understand how they are feeling without being critical.
- > For example, avoid saying things like, "Stop complaining," or "You should be over it by now."
- > It is important to be patient and tolerant, especially when they talk repetitively about their experiences. This is a normal response.
- > Understand that anger is part of a child or adolescent's reaction to their distress. Try to encourage them to talk about what is bothering them, rather than punishing them or telling them to be quiet. However, indicate that abusive language and violence is not allowed.



- > Allow your child to talk about the event, even though this may be upsetting to you. Don't try to stop them from feeling sad as this is a normal part of the healing process.
- > Try to help your child remember good things and to engage in their normal activities.
- > If your children ask, don't be afraid to acknowledge your feelings. However, show positive ways of coping with your difficult feelings.
- > Be open and tolerant of your child's protests over the unfairness of the event and its impact on their lives. Wherever possible strongly acknowledge positive coping in the face of the event.

Seeking help

Should you have any concerns about the issues raised in this pamphlet in relation to your child, we suggest you:

- > Contact your GP
- > Contact your Community Health Service
- > Contact your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service office – [click here](#) for address and contact details for your nearest CAMHS.

<http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/divisions/mentalhealth/index.html>

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