

Problems after a Traumatic Event



Experiencing a traumatic event can have a lasting emotional impact on a child. Monitoring your child's mood and behavior after a trauma is important because witnessing a trauma may lead to the development of different mental health issues.

TIP

Remember, a child does not have to directly experience a traumatic event to have a reaction to it. Children can react and possibly develop mental health issues from witnessing or being threatened by a traumatic event.

It is normal for children to have an emotional or physical response to a traumatic event. Examples of traumatic events include emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, violence, accidents, natural disasters, severe physical injuries, and life-threatening illnesses.

Children's reactions to an event can vary, and some reactions are more severe than others. If a child's reaction to a traumatic event becomes very intense, lasts for a long time, and impacts his or her ability to function, he or she may have a mental health issue.

The following is a list of typical signs and symptoms of a problem after a traumatic event. Your child may have a problem after a traumatic event if he or she:

- Refuses to return to school
- Clings to parents or other family members
- Has persistent fears related to the traumatic event
- Has nightmares, screams during his or her sleep, or wets the bed
- Loses concentration
- Is increasingly irritable
- Is easily startled and jumpy
- Begins to have behavior problems at home and school that are not typical for him or her
- Complains of stomachaches, headaches, or dizziness with no known physical cause
- Withdraws from friends and family
- Is extremely sad and listless
- Is less interested in activities he or she enjoys
- Is preoccupied with the details of the event
- Starts acting younger than his or her age. Some examples of behaviors include bed-wetting, clingy behavior, thumb-sucking, and sharing a bed with a parent.

Possible mental health diagnoses within this symptom cluster include:

- Anxiety Disorders (p48)
- Depression (p67)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (p84)
- Substance Abuse and Dependence (p94)

Talking with your child after a traumatic event

If your child has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, it is important for you to talk to your child about what happened and how it makes him or her feel. Encouraging other family members to talk to your child and support him or her through this difficult time is also important. Parents' support and understanding can make a big difference in a child's ability to deal with the event.

TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD AND DEALING WITH THE EVENT:

- Keep your interactions with your child brief until you've had a chance to collect yourself. Be honest with your child. Let them know that they are safe, but that you need time to gather your thoughts.
- Talk about the facts. However, don't assume that children, especially those under age 8 or 9, will really understand the facts about the traumatic event. They need you to put the facts into perspective.
- Let young children know that they, as well as their family members, are safe. With older children and adolescents, answer their questions about safety in more detail.
- Limit the amount of exposure to media images of the event. Parents can help by watching television with their children.
- Keep up with your family's usual schedule (for example, take your kids to basketball practice as usual).
- Schedule a formal family meeting to discuss the facts and feelings in a calm, orderly fashion.
- Use your family traditions, beliefs, and religious practices, as well as your extended support network, as sources of strength and as ways to find meaning and comfort.
- Follow your child's lead for providing more information or talking about the traumatic event. Your child may need to discuss his or her thoughts on many occasions. Answer his or her questions honestly. Check in with your child and let him or her know you are available to talk.
- Talk to your child's pediatrician if your child shows prolonged signs of stress. Although a certain amount of anxiety is to be expected, prolonged reactions may be a sign that your child needs mental healthcare.

Children pick up on attitudes and feelings of their parents, so parents need to get support. Talk to other adults on an ongoing basis to sort out your own feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

RESOURCES

GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

- Friends Way
401-921-0980
www.friendsway.org
- Home and Hospice Care of Rhode Island
401-727-7070 or 800-338-6555
www.hhcri.net
- Samaritans of Rhode Island
401-272-4044 or 800-365-4044
www.samaritansri.org

VIOLENCE

- Crime Victim Compensation Program at the Office of the Rhode Island General Treasurer
401-222-8590
www.treasury.ri.gov/crimevictim
- Victims Services at the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office
401-274-4400
www.riag.state.ri.us/criminal
- Volunteer Lawyer Program at the Rhode Island Bar Association
401-421-7758 or 800-339-7758
www.ribar.com/public/volunteer.asp