

Helping Children and Youth Cope After Traumatic Events



Image credit: Adobe Stock

Summary: When children and youth are exposed to trauma (i.e. situations that are overwhelming, and/or life threatening situations), there are many things that caring adults can do. This includes directly ensuring that they are safe and out of danger, as well as keeping to routines and being more available for them. Most children and youth will be able to cope with the stress, and may even become stronger as a result. However, in some cases, a traumatic stress may be too much. The person might have troubles with mood, anxiety, and physical symptoms such as troubles with sleep, energy and concentration. If so, then it is recommended to see a health care professional.

Introduction

Children and youth can have strong emotional reactions (or stress reactions) after a difficult experience. A traumatic event is one that causes a child or teen to react with horror, fear and distress. Events that might cause a stress reaction include:

- Being in a car crash
- Getting badly hurt
- Witnessing violence
- Nearly drowning
- Seeing another person get badly hurt

How do children and youth react after traumatic events?

Everyone is different, and reactions often depend on a child's age.

After a traumatic event, children and youth may feel:

- Frightened
- Angry
- Sad
- Guilty
- Ashamed

You may notice that your child or teen:

- 'Regresses' or behaves as they did when they were younger (wetting the bed or being very clingy)
- Cries more often
- Is fearful
- Has nightmares
- Has trouble sleeping
- Has flashbacks (re-lives the traumatic experience)
- Eats more or less than usual
- Becomes 'hypervigilant' (very watchful to detect possible danger)

Helping children and youth to recover

Children and youth react differently to traumatic events than adults do. Parents, teachers and caregivers have a big role to play in helping children to recover after a traumatic experience. It's important to:

- Explain that your child or teen is not to blame for what happened.
- Stay close. Show that you are there to support and care.
- Stick to everyday routines as much as possible. This helps children and youth to feel safe.
- Accept your child's feelings. Let your child or teen know that it's OK to feel angry, sad or frightened after what happened.
- Give chances to express feelings. Allow your child or teen to express feelings by talking, drawing, painting or playing.
- Express your own feelings. It's OK to cry and be upset. But parents need to be able to cope positively with feelings before they can help a child or teen.
- Give your child or teen more control in life. Give choices or let her make decisions about what to wear, what to eat, how to spend free time.
- Notice when your child or teen does something well.
- Be patient and loving. Each child or teen will heal at his own pace.

When to see a professional

Speak with your doctor if you are worried for any reason, or if:

- You think your child or teen's stress reaction is severe
- Your child or teen is not feeling better after a month