

Traumatic Stress

20 in Children

Factsheet for parents and teachers

What is traumatic stress?

Children, like adults, sometimes experience or witness something extremely frightening and dangerous, such as a road accident, a serious injury or a crime. This can cause a traumatic stress reaction, which affects the way the child thinks, feels and behaves. Children can be as severely affected as adults. If you recognise it, you will be better able to help your child to recover, and also to know when to seek professional help.

What are the signs of traumatic stress?

Individual children react in different ways to traumatic events. Immediately after the traumatic event, children may find it hard to sleep and have bad dreams and nightmares. Sometimes, the effects may not appear for days or weeks. They may, however:

- ◆ become fearful, clingy and anxious about being separated from their parents
- ◆ start bedwetting and thumb-sucking again
- ◆ become preoccupied with thoughts and memories of the event
- ◆ be unable to concentrate
- ◆ be irritable and disobedient
- ◆ complain of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach-aches.

All these are normal reactions to an extremely frightening event. With help and support from the people close to them, children begin to get over the shock in a few days, and usually recover after a few weeks.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

Development of Post Traumatic Stress

Sometimes a child has feelings of depression and experiences symptoms of traumatic stress that go on for several weeks and may get worse. If they go on for a long period of time, it is likely that the child may need some help to feel better. If the traumatic experience was so bad that the child was in danger of being killed or seriously injured, they may have felt terrified, horrified and helpless. **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** might follow a dreadful experience of this sort.

Typical signs are:

- flashbacks of the event. For a few moments, it seems as though you are re-living the experience in your mind, like watching an action-replay, which can be distressing and frightening – particularly for children;
- deliberately avoiding thoughts or feelings about it. If you've been in a car crash, you may avoid roads, or even TV programmes about cars, because they remind you of the accident;
- sleeping badly;
- being easily startled and jumping out of your skin at the slightest noise.

Not every traumatised person gets full-blown PTSD, or experience PTSD at all. PTSD is diagnosed only if the symptoms last more than a month. In those who do have PTSD, symptoms usually begin within 3 months of the trauma, and the course of the illness varies. Some people recover within 6 months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases, the condition may be chronic. Occasionally, the illness doesn't show up until years after the traumatic event.

What can help?

The best approach, immediately after a traumatic event, is to accept that a child will be distressed – this is normal. At this stage, parents can help greatly by letting their child talk about the event if they want to, or helping them to relive it in games and drawings. Leaving children alone 'to forget things'

does not help. Talking can help children to adjust. It helps them to make sense of what has happened, to feel less alone with their worries and to regain a sense of control. However, forcing someone to talk about it when they don't want to does not seem to be helpful.

If you have been involved in the traumatic event, you may also be distressed. It is usually better to admit to your children that you are feeling sad and upset. At the same time, you need to make it clear that you don't expect them to look after your feelings.

Sometimes, children find it easier to talk to other adults rather than their parents. Professional help may be needed to help get them get back to normal more quickly, and to prevent or reduce the harmful effects of prolonged stress reactions.

Ask for help if:

- the child's upset feelings and behaviour seem to be getting worse.
- the signs of extreme stress last for longer than about one month.
- worries prevent you, your child or your family getting on with normal, everyday life.
- the child has symptoms of PTSD that go on for longer than a month.

Where can I get help?

If you are concerned about your child at any time following a traumatic event, consult your general practitioner, who will be able to offer you help and support. If problems continue, the doctor may suggest extra help from the local child and adolescent mental health service.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a treatable problem. Psychotherapy (a skilled form of counselling) is an integral part of treatment. There can also be a role for medication, ie antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications can ease the symptoms of depression and help with sleep problems.

If you have been involved directly in a community disaster, special support services will be arranged. Do not hesitate to make contact with them if you want to talk over your worries.

ACKNOWLEDGE:

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