

AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Helping Children Cope

Children and youth, as well as adults, feel the effects of a traumatic event. Children can have a range of reactions and it is not unusual for them to have problems weeks or even months afterwards. Here are some of the more common reactions to look for in children:

COMMON REACTIONS TO STRESS	
Moodiness, irritability, fighting	Inattentiveness, inability to concentrate
Sleep problems	Withdrawing, not talking
Unusual bowel or bladder habits	Being overly emotional for no clear reason
Downward change in grades or behavior at school	Fear about another event occurring
Change in appetite – eating more or less than usual, coupled with weight gain or loss	Fear of losing parents or caregivers, and therefore not wanting to be separated from them
Voicing a variety of physical complaints	

How You Can Help

After a traumatic event has occurred, children of all ages want to be reassured that things are going to be all right. They look first to their parents or caregivers for that support. Sometimes parents are so distraught themselves that they are not aware that there are some things they should be doing to help their children cope. Here are some ways to reassure your child and help them move past the experience:

- > Listen to them but don't force them to share; let it come naturally. One of the most important needs after a traumatic event is to talk about it – often. It may be difficult for you to hear about, or you may tire of hearing the same story, but talking is a crucial part of dealing with the impact of the disaster. Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don't try to make it okay; let them express fears, thoughts, and worries.
- > Allow children to express all the emotions they are feeling. Children need to know that their feelings are “okay” and that lots of people have those feelings in these situations. If feelings such as anger or guilt persist for many months, professional help might be necessary to help them resolve those feelings.
- > Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They express them through other means, such as play acting or drawing. Show interest in this and help them name what they are feeling.
- > Give honest information about the event based on the child's maturity level. Always be truthful. Tell the child that someone died rather than they “went to sleep” or “passed away” because younger children will wonder when they are coming back or be hurt that they left without saying goodbye. Death means different things to children at different ages. Young children (ages 1-5) grieve for the threat to their security, while older children (ages 6+) grieve more for the actual loss.

- > Don't make promises you can't keep. It is important that your child be able to count on you when there is so much else they can't depend on or predict.
- > It's okay to tell your child that you don't have all the answers to their questions. But praise their thoughtful questions.
- > Like adults, children grieve at their own pace. Respect where they are in the grieving process – there is no set timeline for grieving.
- > Older children are sometimes drawn to each other for strength and support in times of tragedy. For example, allow them to spend more time than usual on the computer, texting, or talking on the phone to their friends.
- > Allow older children more privacy, both in physical and emotional space, if they need it to deal with their feelings.
- > Children don't usually ask openly for help, so if they give any clues that they have unmet needs, get help for them right away.
- > Don't expect your child to take care of *your* fears. For example, don't keep your child home from school because you are anxious about being apart from them. Find help to cope with your own fears.

You know your child's personality and behavior patterns. If you see changes that concern you, and they go on for more than two weeks, contact a mental health professional for an assessment.

For more information or resources, contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).