

Tips on Helping Your Child to Cope Following a Trauma



Possible physical and mental effects following trauma you may look out for:

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

- Stomach aches
- Headaches
- Lethargy

EFFECTS ON EMOTIONS

- Anxiety such as problems with concentrating or paying attention, separation anxiety
- Anger, emotional outbursts
- Moodiness or crying, irritability
- Loss of confidence
- Fear of future injury or death of loved ones
- Concerns about being taken care of

EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOUR

- School trouble e.g., memory and concentration difficulties, refusing to attend
- Sleep disturbance e.g., nightmares
- Appetite disturbances e.g. increase or loss of appetite
- Anger or aggression e.g. bullying or fighting with peers
- Withdrawal from social interactions e.g., loss of interest in activities
- Regressing to more 'babyish' ways of behaving
- Distrusting or disobeying adults
- Repeatedly asking the same questions, constant reassurance seeking

EFFECTS ON WAY OF THINKING

- Blaming themselves for the event
- Denying the event even occurred
- Worried about the possibility of similar events happening

EFFECTS ON SPIRITUAL BELIEFS

- If a child has spiritual beliefs they may question their faith or the existence of God or higher spiritual being

What is trauma?

Trauma can be a single event such as a road accident, an unexpected death of a family member or it can be an event lasting over a period of time such as persistent bullying, family separation, neglect or witnessing continuing family and domestic violence.

There are various types of traumas that we might experience, with some of us being relatively unaffected by it while others may be profoundly affected.

Trauma can also be a disaster in which the trauma affects the whole community e.g., Covid-19 virus, flooding and bush fires.

Identifying trauma triggers

As well as the possibility of some children experiencing irritability, loss of appetite and moodiness, they may suddenly and momentarily be transported back to the trauma and relive distressing thoughts and emotions. These flashbacks are often triggered by an ordinary everyday occurrence such as the lights of a passing car or even a raised eyebrow, the sound of scraping of a chair or a door banging, the smell of toast burning or an unexpected push in the back in the school playground. You, being a major figure in your child's life, are in the best position to help prevent your child from being overwhelmed. You can help identify what these triggers are, identify how your child can avoid them or use coping or calming strategies to manage them until more healing has occurred. You may want to seek professional help through your GP or counselling service.

Your child's possible response to trauma

Anticipating or identifying children's response to a trauma can be difficult, not only in that children vary in their reaction to the event, but also there may be a delayed reaction to the trauma.

Just when you think that your child is coping well, perhaps several weeks or months later, signs of major changes in your child's mental and physical wellbeing may appear. It is only then that you may realise that your child's psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing and their way of thinking have been affected.

Helping your child

Taking care of yourself. You can best help your child when you help yourself first! As cabin staff in planes say, 'in the unlikely event of a sudden loss in air pressure, ensure you fasten the oxygen mask to your face before helping others to do so. You cannot help anybody if you are short of oxygen yourself.

Your response to a trauma and your reactions to its impact on your child, will affect your child's ability to cope and recover. Discussing your own anxieties with your child or other adults when your child is around is likely to exacerbate your child's insecurity and fear. Your child looks to you for reassurance.

Fortunately, you can get your support by talking and sharing information about your concerns with friends and relatives or being part of a support group, church, or community group. Doing so will maintain your morale and mental wellbeing.

Your physical and mental wellbeing also depends on healthy eating, drinking enough water, sticking to exercise routines, and getting enough sleep.

Normal responses to trauma

Much of what your child experiences and the way your child behaves after a traumatic event can be seen as a normal response.

If your child has headaches or stomach aches, let your child know that this is normal after a trauma. If the pains or aches persist, make an appointment for your child with a GP just in case.

If your child blames themselves and feels guilty or ashamed for what has happened, let your child know that it is normal to feel like this after a trauma. These thoughts are not helpful so help your child to work through it. You can ask your child how they know it is their fault and then ask your child to consider the evidence supporting this view and, more importantly, the evidence for it not being their fault.

If your child behaves in challenging ways, let your child know it is normal to be upset and angry. Helping to find other ways to express these feelings will get rid of the pent-up energy and divert it into a more acceptable physical activity, e.g., kicking a football or some indoor activity (room permitting!).

If your child continually is reliving the trauma when playing or drawing, let your child know that thinking about the event is normal. Over time, help your child to express these feelings in an alternative way, such as, encouraging 'safety' games such as stories with a positive ending or drawing of situations where everything and everybody is safe and protected after going through an ordeal.

Times to talk and listen

Sometimes children may talk readily about their worries and concerns in the quieter moments before bedtime. Others may do so readily in conversations when the family are together (such as mealtime).

Listening to your child will give you an understanding of how your child views the situation, e.g., they may be confused or anxious. In addition, using these conversations with your child can allow you to catch up with what your child's friends are saying. For some children their friends' opinions are often more important than yours. You will then have an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings about what is going on.

They can learn that some of the information they get from friends may be rumours and speculation, which, unless challenged, may cause uncertainty and insecurity in your child.

Yet other children have difficulty in talking at all about their worries and remain silent. If your child is reluctant to talk you might open a conversation by sharing your own feelings (without going into any detail), e.g., acknowledging that you find it scary and probably others do so as well and asking how your child is feeling about what has been happening. Acknowledging that others had similar feelings about the event may help your child feel that they are not alone in their worries or fears.

Minimise exposure to negative news coverage

The more your child sees or hears news about the disaster or event related to the bad experience, the more worried your child may become. News footage often magnifies the trauma. If your child watches a news report or listens to the coverage of the disaster on the radio, sit with your child so you can discuss and perhaps reduce the sensational tone of the report.

Let your child know that positive things are being done to keep them safe, such as, identifying what the government and community groups are doing e.g., in the case of a bush fire by sending fire equipment and more fire staff, medical supplies, food and water or in dealing with Covid-19 virus by introducing social distancing, etc.

Words are often not enough

While reassuring words are beneficial, sometimes words are not enough. Your child will benefit from your touch—extra cuddling, hugs or just a reassuring pat on the back. Physical contact will give your child a feeling of security, which is so important after a scary and disturbing experience.

Maintaining routines as much as possible

Keep things as "normal" as possible. Routines, particularly at bedtime and mealtime, help your child feel safe and secure. However, this can be difficult to establish during and after disasters such as the spread of Covid-19 virus when daily activities are disrupted. There is therefore a need to plan, with your child, a daily timetable or schedule of activities where games involving movement and exercise, schoolwork, access to online activities including maintaining contact with friends will replace the previous routine. All of this helps to reestablish your child's sense of safety.

Coping in different ways

Children vary in the ways that they cope with traumatic events. Some might want to spend extra time with friends and relatives; some might want to spend more time alone. Some are reluctant to lend a hand in the house or get involved in decision-making, e.g., helping select food to eat at mealtime while others are happy to do so. For some, making even minor decisions, such as taking turns in choosing game activities for the morning or helping with household activities such as helping to tidy the house, can give a sense of control and reduce a feeling of helplessness.

This tip sheet provides general information and is not intended to be a substitute for professional support. Please reach out for support if you are worried about you or your child.
