

After a traumatic event: How to help children

Traumatic events can be scary for both you and your child. Thankfully, there are many things that you can do to help your child after a traumatic event.

What is a traumatic event?

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), a traumatic event is “a frightening, dangerous or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity”. After a traumatic event, some children may develop traumatic stress and some may not. Several factors can influence this. Children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are 3 times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma as a teenager or later. Additionally, the nature and severity of the event, whether the child was actively involved in the incident or merely a witness, how the child’s immediate caregivers respond and whether the child had suffered from traumatic stress previously can influence a child’s response to a traumatic event. Children can cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults help them with their experiences.

How to help child survivors

Understand how children may respond to a traumatic event:

- Some children may not ever feel upset or show signs of distress.
- Some may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months, but then feel upset and show signs of distress.

Signs of distress may include:

- Being upset over the loss of a favourite toy, blanket, teddy bear or other things that adults might consider insignificant, but which are important to the child.
- Changing from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive, or maybe changing from being outgoing to shy and afraid.
- Developing nighttime fears. They may be afraid to sleep alone at night with the light off, to sleep in their own room, or they may have nightmares or bad dreams.
- Being afraid that the event will reoccur.
- Becoming easily upset, crying and whining.

- Losing trust in adults. After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.
- Reverting to younger behaviour, such as bed-wetting and thumb sucking.
- Not wanting parents out of their sight and refusing to go to school or childcare.
- Feeling guilty that they caused the disaster because of something that they had said or done.
- Becoming afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
- Having symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.
- Worrying about where they and their family will live.



Start supporting the child as soon as possible after the event

- Don't minimise the event – talk with the children about how they are feeling and listen without judgement. Let them know that they can have their own feelings, which might be different than others. Let the children take their time to figure things out and to have their feelings. Help them learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, mad and scared. Just make sure that the words fit their feelings – not yours.
- Don't give children more information than they can handle about the trauma.
- Limit their exposure to additional trauma, including news reports.
- Encourage the children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences.
- Write a story together of the event. You might start with: Once upon a time, there was a terrible _____ and it scared us all _____. This is what happened: _____. Make sure that you end with, "And, now we are safe".
- Make puppets with the children and put on a puppet show for family and friends, or help children put on a skit about what they experienced.
- Allow the children to grieve losses.
- Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them. Reassure them many times. Find ways to emphasise that you love them.
- Reassure the children that the disaster was not their fault in any way.
- Stay together as a family as much as possible. If you will be away for a time, tell them where you are going and make sure that you return or call at the time that you say you will.
- Go back as soon as possible to former routines or develop new ones. Maintain a regular schedule for the children.
- Let them have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
- Help your children know that others love them and feel connected to others. Visit, talk on the phone with or write/draw to family members, friends and neighbours.
- Help your children learn to trust adults again by keeping promises and including children in planning routines and outings.
- Help your children regain faith in the future by helping them develop plans for activities that will take place later – next week, next month.
- Children cope better when they are healthy, so make sure that your children get needed health care as soon as possible.

- Make sure that the children are getting balanced meals and eating enough food and getting enough rest.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, rub their backs, listen to music, talk quietly about the day.
- Allow special privileges, such as leaving the light on when they sleep for a time after the disaster.
- Develop positive anniversary activities to commemorate the event. These events may bring tears, but they are also a time to celebrate survival and the ability to get back to a normal life.
- Play with Play-Doh or clay with your child. It is good for children to release tension and make symbolic creations.
- Create music with your child. It helps relieve stress and tension.
- Provide the children with clothes, shoes, hats etc. so that they can play “dress up” and can pretend to be adults in charge of recovering from the disaster and “being in charge”.

Seek additional support if needed

- Support from a mental health professional who specialises in helping children after trauma may be valuable under several circumstances:
 - If you are not sure if your child needs support from a mental health clinician, it may be beneficial to consult with a mental health clinician.
 - If your child is exhibiting intense and/or prolonged symptoms of distress.



Remember to take care of yourself so that you can take care of your children



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.



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