

MANAGING DISTRESS FROM A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress

Traumatic events can trigger very distressing memories and emotions. It reminds us that unpredictable events can touch us all. We may recall pain, suffering and loss. The intensity of our emotions can take us by surprise and feel overwhelming. We can't erase the memories or turn off natural emotional reactions. We can choose how we respond to them. The strategies below may help you manage and move through the thoughts and feelings that can occur.

Responding to emotional reactions

Anticipate a reaction. Know that it's normal to have strong feelings around traumatic events. Let others who care about you know that this may be difficult to cope with. Please ask for support if needed. Call your EAP for confidential support. Arrange your schedule to allow a time and a place to grieve if needed.

Allow your feelings. You may feel grief, anger, anxiety, exhaustion, or something else. Memories may be challenging. Or you may just feel a bit unsettled, sad, or thoughtful. These are all normal reactions. Be patient and kind to yourself. Talking with people who care about you can help you process your feelings. Some find it helpful to let thoughts and feelings flow out in a journal or in a creative way, such as with painting or music. If emotions grow too intense or feelings, such as blame, guilt, or grief, begin to seem overwhelming, reach out for more support from family, friends, or a mental health professional.

Find healthy ways to restore balance. Basic mind-body techniques can help you release tension from your body, which can help reduce anxiety and bring a sense of calm. For example, focus on your breathing and take nice slow, deep breaths. Try to release the stress from your body as you breathe out. Activities that feel comforting or fulfilling can also help you feel more grounded – reading a good book, walking outdoors, or enjoying a hobby, for example. For some, taking action – getting involved in a cause or working for change is the key. Avoid substance use or other unhealthy coping methods.

Reach out. Leaning on others who care about you can help you feel stronger in difficult times. Talking to others keeps you from being alone with troubling memories. You can get other viewpoints and a chance to share your feelings. It's also an opportunity to enjoy time together and allow your focus to shift away from thoughts of the tragedy.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help

If you're having a difficult time managing your stress, your EAP is here to support you. You can call and ask for a telephone consult. You will be connected to a professional who will be prepared to help.

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HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress

Like adults, children of all ages need to process what has happened after a traumatic event. They need reassurance that everything will be all right. But they have much less experience to draw on to do that. Children look to their parents and caregivers to help them understand and manage this experience. We don't have an exact blueprint, but there are some ways we can help.

How we can help

- › **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 or you may tire of hearing the same questions, but talking is an important part of dealing with the impact. You don't have to try to make it okay. Just let them share their thoughts and concerns. Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting.
- › **Answer questions simply.** Children need to know, at an age-appropriate level, what's going on. Ask what they know or have heard, then share facts using language they can understand. Don't feel you have to give explanations beyond what they've asked for. It's okay to tell your child that you don't have all the answers.
- › **Strive to be open and honest.** When we are, it tells a child that it's okay to discuss what happened, and to have questions and feelings about it. They learn they can rely on you to give honest answers, to be consistent, and to hear them. If we hide, lie, or only talk to other adults in private, children get the message that the topic is off limits and fears can grow.
- › **Allow children to express what they're feeling.** This may be anger, worry, sadness, guilt, curiosity or some other emotion. Children need to know that their feelings are "okay" and that lots of people have those feelings in these situations. Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They often show them through other means, such as games, role-playing, or drawing. You can help them name what they're feeling. If feelings such as anger or guilt go on for your child for many months, professional help might be needed to help them work through those feelings.
- › **Understand normal reactions.** As with adults, a traumatic event stresses normal coping abilities. Feelings of fear and helplessness can trigger hard-wired stress reactions. See *box*. You may see your child acting differently, perhaps more withdrawn or more clingy. Small children may revert to younger behaviors, such as baby talk. If behaviors are challenging, it's important to remember the root cause and respond with comfort.

COMMON REACTIONS IN CHILDREN

Moodiness, irritability, fighting

Sleep problems

Downward change in grades or behavior at school

Change in appetite – eating more or less than usual, or uncharacteristic pickiness

Voicing a variety of physical complaints

Inattentiveness, inability to concentrate

Withdrawing, not talking

Being overly emotional for no clear reason

Fear about another event happening

Fear of losing parents or caregivers, and therefore not wanting to be separated from them

Reappearance of behaviors they've outgrown – baby talk, thumb-sucking, toilet accidents

- › **Prioritize reassurance.** More than just saying, “Everything’s going to be okay,” give children real information to focus on. For example, you might talk about how your family is staying safe. Be careful not to make promises you can’t keep. It’s important that your child be able to count on you when there is so much else they can’t depend on or predict. Actions also help our kids feel reassured. Maintaining routines, rituals and schedules creates a sense of structure. It tells them that life is still following some predictable norms. Being connected and close as a family is also reassuring. Spend one-on-one time together and give them your undivided attention as much as possible.
- › **Give them coping tools.** Children, like adults, want the feeling of powerlessness to go away. They want to find a place of emotional stability where they don’t feel scared or sad. Talking through feelings and patiently allowing repeated questions is an example of how you can help. You can also help them learn active coping skills, such as talking back to anxious thoughts (“That’s my worry brain talking!”). You can show them how to use slow, deep breathing to calm tension. Encouraging drawing and other creative activities gives them a way to express and respond to feelings. You can also help them find ways to help others, such as volunteering. This can help them feel empowered and take away some of the feelings of helplessness.
- › **Give older children some space.** Older children are drawn to peers in times of tragedy. They draw strength and support from each other. Allow some freedom to teens around how they make themselves feel better. For example, being on their phone more than usual or playing music loudly. Allow them privacy (both physical and emotional space), but be available to them.
- › **Involve the support people in your child’s life.** Share the circumstances with your pediatrician. Let your child’s teacher, school counselor and other caregivers know what has happened and how your child has been affected. These caring professionals can help guide you and create a net of support throughout your child’s day.
- › **Manage your own emotions.** If the event brings up fear and other emotions for you, turn to the adults in your life to help you cope. Don’t lean on your child for emotional support.
- › **You can find more information** and event/age-specific resources from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsn.org

Trust your instincts

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

Know that 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.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can offer help and resources.

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