



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Trauma has thrown your life into chaos, and you are trying to pick up the pieces and figure out how to move forward with you and your family. This resource is meant to help you with putting the pieces back together and begin the healing process.

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What is trauma?

- Trauma is a dangerous, violent or life-threatening situation that threatens the safety and security of an individual. These experiences often cause strong and upsetting feelings and can disrupt a person's daily function and development. This could include:
 - Physical abuse
 - Sexual abuse
 - Witnessing domestic violence
 - Witnessing other traumatic events
 - Being in a natural disaster
- Intrusive re-experiencing symptoms (memories, flashback, nightmares, bodily experiences) can be very distressing
- Problems arise with attempts to avoid these experiences or triggers of the trauma, with self-medicating, social isolation and engaging in self-destructive behaviours

Common stress reactions

It is normal to have an emotional response and symptoms associated with experiencing a traumatic event. These are typically short lived and do not cause significant impairment in one's ability to live and function day to day. Some of these reactions can include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability, anger and frustration
- Depressed, fearful and anxious feelings
- Poor focus and attention
- Higher or lower activity level
- Substance use
- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)
- Feeling disconnected or numb
- Decreased self-care

Extreme stress reactions

When trauma has a profound impact on a person's ability to function day to day and leads to problematic symptoms these can be considered Extreme Stress Reactions and can be related to the development of a mental disorder like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Examples of Extreme Stress Reactions include:

- Preoccupation with the event
- Sense of helplessness
- Attempts to over control
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Chronic exhaustion
- Depression and hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts, attempts or self-harm
- Changes in memory or perception
- Changes to how you are seeing the world or others



The impact of trauma

Recognize how your own trauma may be impacting your parenting and reactions. You may experience the following:

- Parenting may trigger memories or bodily sensations from your own childhood
- Emotional regulation is difficult when parenting and can cause you to lose your temper
- Difficulties with self-soothing and calming yourself down from distress
- Having difficulties distinguishing between normal child behaviours, experiences and trauma responses
- Difficulties caring for your child's physical needs (bathing, diaper changes, etc.) due to reminders of trauma
- Difficulties staying present with your child and feeling detached or numb
- Experiencing excessive worries about doing the same things to your child
- Overly questioning your decisions and instinct about parenting
- Persistent fear that your child will be traumatized or victimized with the excessive need to protect them

TAKING CARE AFTER TRAUMA

Parents taking care of themselves

- Take care of yourself. Drink enough water, eat regularly, get regular sleep (7-9 hours) and exercise.
- Connect with friends, family and community that you normally do and support one another.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any life-altering decisions during this time.
- Give yourself a break. Take time to rest and do things that you enjoy doing.
- Seek professional help if you are struggling.



Parents taking care of their children

- Spend time with your children. You can offer to talk about what's going on or do a fun activity that you normally do.
- Let them know it's okay if they don't want to talk about what happened. People are going to want to make sure they are okay, but it may be re-traumatizing to discuss it, and it may help to know they can avoid talking about it for now.
- Encourage your child's self-care. Help them to drink enough water, eat regularly, get enough sleep and regular exercise.
- Help children feel safe. Tell them about some of the safety measures you and others in your community are taking. Encourage them to share their concerns with you.
- Maintain expectations or "rules." Stick to the regular family rules, to ensure they will be safe.
- Get back into your regular routines, rituals and daily rhythms as much as possible to endorse a sense of normalcy for children.
- Pray for and with your children.

TALKING ABOUT TRAUMA



Talking to children about trauma

- Ensure that you are in a good emotional space and that you have a good relationship with your child. Focus on those first before you try to engage them in a conversation.
- Start the conversation with them. They likely already have an idea of what is going on and talking with them will lessen the uncertainty in their minds about it.
- Ask them if they would like to talk about what happened. Respect their wishes if they don't want to talk and let them know they can come to you if they want.
- If they want to talk, ask them a question about what they already know. Actively listen to what they have to say and try not to interrupt.
- Gently correct any misconceptions or inaccurate information and give them age-appropriate information that is correct.
- Limit media exposure for you and your child. Actively engaging with screens or hearing it passively while others watch could be upsetting if there are ongoing reminders.
- Be a positive role model and consider sharing your own feelings in an appropriate way. Let them know your concerns but also how you have been coping with them, so they don't feel like they are becoming your counsellor.
- Be patient. They may have difficulties expressing how they are feeling and they may want to talk aloud to work out their thoughts and feelings on the situation.



UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

Resilience is a person's ability to maintain a certain level of function and experience minimal distress following a traumatic event. They could also experience some minor difficulties in coping followed by a return to their normal function.



What helps with building a child's resilience?

Factors that increase a child's resilience following trauma include:

- Support from family, friends, school and community
- Resources to buffer the negative consequences of trauma (financial, supports, etc.)
- Feeling safe at home, school and in the community
- Having high self-esteem – a positive sense of self-worth
- Having a high sense of self-efficacy – the belief they can be successful in their life
- Having a sense of meaning in life – including spiritual and cultural beliefs, goals and dreams
- Possessing talents or skills in an area of life (sports, academics, art, etc.)
- Having various coping skills

Certain factors such as living in poverty, racism, ongoing community violence, social isolation and illness can reduce a child's resilience.

How to boost a child's resilience

Here are ways to promote a child's resilience:

1. Focus on building your connection and alliance with your young person
2. Identify their strengths as well as the issues they are facing and let them hear it
3. Instill hope and encouragement
4. Help develop practical solutions to problems presented
5. Build their awareness of competence in their lives through school and activities
6. Help them feel empowered to make some changes in their lives





EFFECTIVE TREATMENTS FOR CHILDREN AFTER TRAUMA

Treatment for children after experiencing trauma focuses on restoring a sense of safety, stability, and emotional regulation.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapies

This is a therapy that looks at how a person's thoughts and the way they act impact the way they feel with their emotions and in their body. These therapies help youth with:

- Ensuring the importance of the safety of the child
- Learning stress management and relaxation skills
- Decreasing avoidance of the reminders of the traumatic event through exposure strategies in a supportive manner
- Creating a coherent "narrative" or story about what happened during the event and correcting any misunderstandings through that story of what happened.
- Correcting unhealthy or wrong views that resulted from the experience, such as self-blame or over-generalizing
- Help to modify any unhealthy and unhelpful behaviours (trouble sleeping, substance abuse, sedentary living, etc.) that may be contributing to their symptoms
- Involving parents so that they can also help their child with new strategies and ways to talk about what has happened.

Medication

Medication is not a mainstay of treatment with regards to trauma and PTSD, as therapy and correcting social and environmental factors should be the focus of treatment. Medication does not change what has happened to the child or what they have experienced, and they will benefit from talking with supportive adults and receiving support. However, medication can be helpful with some symptoms that trauma disrupts in young people. Sleep and anxiety are frequently disrupted by trauma and medication can be helpful with symptoms like these. The brain cannot heal when it is not rested or fed, and the person cannot heal when they are isolated, so medication can be a part of a treatment plan to assist especially when someone is not engaged or interested in therapy or talking about what has been going on yet.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Talking about the traumatic event or even the struggles that you have been having since the event will help decrease the burden of symptoms caused by trauma and decrease the power that trauma has over you and your child's lives. Talk about it when both you and your child are ready. Trauma can take away your sense of control, and a big part of healing is taking back that control in small and big ways over time as we learn to cope with the changes that trauma has caused. There is hope and you and your family can feel better, despite how trauma changes things.



REFERENCES

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