

Steps to Recovery Following a Traumatic Event: Tips for Parents

What to do immediately

- **Talk. It's usually a good idea to talk about the event with your children.** Try to be calm and straightforward. Children often can tell when their parents are upset. Admit how you are feeling. If children see that parents can talk openly, that may help children to talk as well.
- Take your cues from your children. **If they don't want to talk about it, then let it drop.** People cope in different ways, and some children may do better when not pushed to talk. There is no "right" way to talk about these experiences.
- Tell the truth as much as possible. One's imagination is usually worse than the truth. If you can't answer a question, let them know that, and that you will try to figure out an answer for them.
- Siblings or children that weren't actually at the event may also develop symptoms.
- Even very young children can be affected. Children as young as three years can remember personal events. Developmentally-appropriate assessment tools are available for this age group.
- You do not need to tell them, "It's going to be OK." Don't try to make them feel better and fix everything. That's unrealistic. You may just need to be there quietly while they express their feelings.
- Don't worry if they don't talk right away. They may bring it up on their own later.
- Do things to **increase their sense of safety.** This may include them sleeping with you, you staying home from work, and asking them directly what would help them feel safe.
- Distraction can also be helpful to keep children from ruminating excessively about the events. If they seem overly fixated on the traumas, do some fun things.
- Limit what they watch about the event on TV and the internet if it disturbs them.



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What to expect in the first month

- Nearly 100% of trauma victims show some emotional or behavioral problems in the first month. Watch and wait for the first month. Take some comfort, however, as most people are resilient. Research shows that approximately 70% of victims of trauma do not develop long-lasting symptoms.
- If symptoms are excessive and impairing in the first month, it is appropriate to seek help right away. You can start with your pediatrician or school counselor if you don't know any mental health providers. Some children may need brief counseling or short-term medication to help them sleep, function and recover.
- Pay attention to how you are feeling too. Research shows that parents of children exposed to traumatic events may also develop emotional symptoms as well.

What to do for the long-term

- If emotional or behavioral problems **persist after the first month, it is time to seek help.** PTSD symptoms are chronic. If symptoms persist after the first month, they are likely to remain for years, unless children receive specific evidence-based treatment.
- The most common problems to develop after traumas are symptoms of **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. It is very common also for other conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, and defiance to develop at the same time as PTSD. More information and resources are available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at www.nctsn.org.
- **PTSD symptoms** in children include irritability, increased worry about many different bad things happening, increased heart rate or breathing when thinking about the event or being in places that remind the child of the event, sleep troubles and nightmares, avoidance of talking about the event or anything that reminds the children about the events.
- **PTSD symptoms are very treatable.** Some children improve in a few sessions, and others need 10-15 sessions of evidence-based therapies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The NCTSN website has tips on how to find help and you can ask your pediatrician or other professionals for local resources.
- If loved ones died in the trauma, **grief** may be another important issue that needs special treatment.

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