

How to: help your child after an extremely stressful experience

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Overview

Life is full of unexpected happenings; some good, some bad. When children are exposed to very stressful events it can bring about a number of changes that parents need to understand and know how to manage to help the child adjust and cope.

It is common for people to refer casually to difficult childhood experiences as traumatic but many situations which children encounter falls into the category of normal stress like going to the dentist or moving house. Trauma is different to ordinary stress in childhood. Trauma involves a sudden, extraordinary experience of overwhelming terror.

Trauma or extremely stressful events may be things like natural disasters; witnessing or experiencing physical violence or sexual molestation, suffering from accidental injuries or severe illness and exposure to single terrifying experiences and loss of a parent or caregiver.

Children learn how to understand and cope effectively or not with their very stressful experiences through the reactions of the people they love or depend on most, which are their parents or caregivers. This can often leave you feeling alone, attempting to care for these children who are often exhibiting significant behavioural and emotional difficulties.

It is important to understand that there is a period of time after an event that it is considered normal to be experiencing some difficulties. This is generally seen as about a month. If problems continue beyond this time then it is important to seek help.

Children's reactions differ to these very stressful events depending on their age and developmental stage. One might expect that a preschooler would react very differently to teenager. Children often express their distress or feelings indirectly in their behaviour because they experience the event as threatening theirs or loved ones safety and security.

Changes you may observe are...

- Children may regress in their behaviour and start behaving like a younger child. This is an attempt to return to a time when the child felt safer. They might start asking for a bottle or dummy again, ask to sleep in your bed, suffer separation anxiety again, throw temper tantrums again or start wetting the bed again.
- They may also show signs of hyperarousal like suffering with nightmares, startle easier, suffer with physical complaints, appear impulsive and overactive and find it generally hard to focus and settle.
- They may appear to have a personality change suddenly appearing irritable and angry, anxious and worried, withdrawn, dependent and clingy, sad and depressed, unmotivated and lose their confidence. They may not want to go and play with friends preferring to stay close to home and the adults. Sometimes they become rigid and develop routines to reduce the anxiety. Relationships with friends and family may also change and they often appear over reactive to small things that they would have previously coped with.
- They may start to experience significant fears. These may be specific to the particular event or just generally starting to be fearful of things like the dark, strangers or of things they previously enjoyed.

How to deal with it...

- Encourage them to express their feelings. Hold them and stay with them giving them reassurance that you will be there for them.
- If necessary give them an explanation of what has happened. Keep to the facts without unnecessary detail.
- If you have been involved in the event and are very stressed too your child may be worried about you. Reassure them that although you are stressed and upset you will be ok.
- Keep communicating with them and encourage questions. Ask questions of them about how they are feeling, what are they thinking and imagining. Tell them how others often feel.
- Encourage them to be children and to play and explore when if you as an adult don't feel like it.
- Try to get back to the routines and familiarity as much as possible. This helps increase their sense of safety and security making their world more predictable. If changes have to occur try to give your child notice.
- Don't overreact to regressive or difficult behaviour. Talk about the observed behaviour with your child and how you understand it is their way of showing stress and try to reassure them and give alternatives.
- Take concerns and complaints seriously and reassure the child
- Give them time, as children can be resilient and with appropriate support return to their normal selves.
- However, if concerning behaviours persist or you are having difficulties understanding or managing your child's behaviour seek help from a qualified child psychologist or child psychiatrist.