

## What is a traumatic event?

Traumatic events are often frightening or shocking. They are commonly outside the range of 'normal' experience and can be sudden, overwhelming, unexpected, threatening and may include loss.

## When a child is affected

When a child (or a person close to them) experiences a traumatic event, their reactions can be similar to that of an adult, although due to their age, they do not always possess the ability to express these new feelings.

## Common reactions

Listed are the range of common reactions that can be experienced during and after a trauma by children. They can be intense, overwhelming and difficult to cope with. They are all normal reactions to abnormal events.

People react differently according to their age, development and past experiences. There is nothing wrong with a child if they do or do not experience these reactions. It is a natural process, and is both normal and common to have reactions to extraordinary events. These reactions are not related to coping ability, nor do they indicate future developmental problems.

Reactions may be immediate or delayed. Some occur days, weeks or even months later. Some reactions may be brought on by other events related to the initial trauma. It is helpful

to acknowledge their reactions and help them through their recovery.

### Behaviours

- Acting out
- Aggression
- Distress
- Disturbed sleep
- Isolation
- Separation anxiety
- Misbehaving
- Physical health
- Startled easily
- Tantrums
- Becoming subdued and withdrawn

### Feelings

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Sadness

### Physical

- Change of eating and appetite
- Chills
- Difficulty sleeping and change of sleeping patterns
- Dizziness
- Easily startled
- Headaches
- Sickness and diarrhoea
- Increased heart rate
- Muscle ache
- Hyperventilation (fast, deep breathing)
- Sweating
- Tiredness
- Trembling
- Visual disturbances (surroundings look unfamiliar)

### Thoughts

- Self Blame
- Images and memories
- Lack of safety
- Revenge

## What can you do to help?

**Keep to usual routines** – but be flexible in your expectations.

**Listen** – to children. Allow them to talk naturally and freely about their feelings. Some children may choose not to, or are too young to express their emotions verbally, and are more likely to show their feelings through their play.

**Talk** – to children. Reassure them that their feelings are normal.

**Activities** – encourage them to carry on with social activities. Playing with friends is important as a welcome distraction from what has happened.

**Support from others** – explain what has happened to the child to their school, playschool etc so that they understand how he or she has been affected.

**Fear** – understand what triggers a child's fear in order to protect them from frightening situations. Avoid television programmes that may remind them of the incident.

**Separation** – minimise unnecessary separations until the child feels more secure.

**Being firm and consistent** – keep to your usual expectations and routines with your child.

**Physical health** – young children may complain of feeling ill or have aches and pains when there is no medical explanation.

**Tantrums** – all of these reactions may come together in the form of extreme tantrums.

**Professional help** – monitor how the child is coping at home, school and with friends. Seek professional help for signs of depression, accident proneness, restlessness or persistent changes to personality.

**Be assured** – with time and care children can make a full recovery from trauma. Treatment is available if they need it.

### Psychological aspects

Allow a child's mind to follow its natural recovery pattern by:

- letting them think about the trauma when prompted to do so but without forcing them to
- continue to go to the places they normally go to even if it causes unpleasant memories
- recognising their reactions to trauma as natural and normal
- recognising that any self-criticism or guilt they may feel are common aspects of post trauma reactions
- expressing their feelings when it is safe to do so
- noticing how the reactions gradually reduce in intensity
- encouraging positive ways of coping
- understanding that outside events may slow down the recovery process eg media coverage, new information about the event, anniversaries etc

### Further help

#### British Red Cross

[www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)  
Regional: 0115 852 8000

#### Child Bereavement Trust

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)  
Support and Information Line: 01494 446648

#### Cruse - Bereavement Care

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)  
National: 0844 477 9400  
Chesterfield/NE: 01246 550080

#### Samaritans

[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)  
National: 08457 90 90 90  
Chesterfield: 01246 270000  
Derby: 01332 364444

#### The Trauma Clinic

[www.traumaclinic.org.uk](http://www.traumaclinic.org.uk)  
National: 020 7323 9890

#### The Compassionate Friends

[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)  
Helpline: 0845 1232304

**Treetops Hospice Care** - counselling and emotional support services

[www.treetopshospice.org.uk](http://www.treetopshospice.org.uk)  
Risley: 0115 949 6944

#### Victim Support

[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)  
National: 0845 30 30 900  
Regional: 01629 825864

#### Winston's Wish

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)  
National: 08452 03 04 05

Alternatively, contact the child's General Practitioner (GP), who will be able to refer them to a specialist service if necessary.

# Helping children cope with a traumatic event

The purpose of this leaflet is to assist readers in recognising and managing common reactions to a traumatic event

This leaflet has been produced in consultation with