

Trauma and families

Public health information

Summary

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing event. On most occasions though, these reactions subside as part of the body's natural healing and recovery process. Family members who experience a shared distressing event often become closer and appreciate each other more.

A traumatic experience is any event in life that causes a threat to our safety and potentially places our own life or the lives of others at risk. As a result, a person experiences high levels of emotional, psychological, and physical distress that temporarily disrupts their ability to function normally in day-to-day life.

Examples of potentially traumatic experiences include natural disasters such as a bushfire or flood, being witness to an armed robbery, having a serious car accident, being in a plane that is forced to make an emergency landing, or being physically assaulted.

Reactions to trauma

In a family, each member will react to the traumatic event in their own way. If family members don't understand each other's experience, then misunderstandings, communication breakdowns and other problems can result.

Even if you cannot understand exactly what another member is going through, being aware of common reactions and their effect on family life can help everyone cope better in the long run.

Examples of common reactions to trauma are:

- feeling as if you are in a state of 'high alert' and are 'on watch' for anything else that might happen
- feeling emotionally numb, as if in a state of 'shock'
- becoming emotional and upset
- feeling extremely fatigued and tired
- feeling very stressed and/or anxious
- being very protective of others including family and friends
- not wanting to leave a particular place for fear of 'what might happen'.

Also, it is important to remember that despite the above traumatic reactions, many families look back and see that crises have actually helped them to become closer and stronger. However, don't hesitate to seek professional help if you are uncertain or think your family is struggling to recover.

Family life following the event

Every family is different but, generally speaking, common changes to family life soon after the event include:

- Parents may fear for each other's safety and the safety of their children away from home.
- Family members may experience nightmares or upsetting dreams about the event.
- Fear of another distressing experience happening may affect family life.
- Anger at whoever is believed to have caused the event can often flow on to the affected loved one or the family in general.

- Family members may feel overwhelmed by insecurity or lack of control, or at the thought of having so much to do.
- Family members may not know how to talk to each other. Each person is struggling to understand what has happened and how they feel about it. If talking makes people upset, they will often avoid it.
- Impatience, misunderstandings, arguments over small things and withdrawal from each other can all impact on family life and relationships.

Disruption to family relationships

- Family relationships can also be affected by a traumatic event – for example, parents may feel unsure about how to help their children after the crisis.
- Communication breaks down as each family member struggles in their own way to come to terms with what has happened.
- Children don't want to go to school.
- Parents don't want to go to work.
- Household schedules tend to lapse – for example, chores are missed, regular mealtimes are disrupted or recreation is neglected.
- The usual arrangements for household responsibilities change. Children may cook meals for a time, parents may feel unable to do tasks, or children may not want to be alone.

People react differently to trauma

It is important to remember that it is normal for people to respond in different ways to distressing events. However, sometimes people's responses can clash. One person may withdraw and need time to themselves, while the other needs company and wants to talk about it. Although this can seem quite confusing at times, giving a person the necessary space to work through their own reaction can be extremely helpful.

With families, common reactions may include:

- **Strong feelings** – include anxiety, fear, sadness, guilt, anger, vulnerability, helplessness or hopelessness. These feelings will not just apply to the event, but to many other previously normal areas of life as well.
- **Physical symptoms** – include headache, nausea, stomach ache, insomnia, broken sleep, bad dreams, changed appetite, sweating and trembling, aches and pains, or a worsening of pre-existing medical conditions.
- **Thinking is affected** – include difficulties with concentrating or thinking clearly, short-term memory problems, difficulty planning or making decisions, inability to absorb information, recurring thoughts of the traumatic event, thinking about other past tragedies, pessimistic thoughts or an inability to make decisions.
- **Behaviour changes** – include a drop in work or school performance, turning to changed eating patterns, using drugs or alcohol, being unable to rest or keep still, lack of motivation to do anything, increased aggressiveness or engaging in self-destructive or self-harming activities.

Family life – weeks or months later

Family relationships may change weeks or even months after the event. Because time has passed, family members sometimes don't realise how changes are directly linked to the event.

Every family is different but, generally speaking, common changes in the weeks or months after the event include:

- Family members may become short-tempered or irritable with each other, which can lead to arguments and friction.
- They may lose interest in activities or perform less well at work or school.
- Children may be clingy, grizzly, demanding or naughty.
- Teenagers may become argumentative, demanding or rebellious.
- Individuals may feel neglected and misunderstood.
- Some family members may work so hard to help loved ones, they neglect to look after themselves.

- Individual family members may feel less attached or involved with one another.
- Parents may experience emotional or sexual problems in their relationship.
- Everyone feels exhausted and wants support, but cannot give much in return.

Family life – years later

Sometimes, the response to a distressing or frightening event may take a long time to show. In some cases, it may take years for problems to surface. This can happen if the person is very busy helping others or dealing with related issues, such as insurance, rebuilding, relocation, legal processes or financial problems. When things have returned to normal, their reactions may show up.

Every family is different but, generally speaking, changes to family dynamics can include:

- The experience may be relived when faced with a new crisis.
- Problems may seem worse than they are and be more difficult to handle.
- Changes to family life that occurred in the days, weeks or months after the event may become permanent habits.
- Family members may cope differently with reminders of the event. Some may want to commemorate the anniversary or revisit the scene of the event, while others may want to forget about it.
- Conflict in coping styles can lead to arguments and misunderstandings if the family members aren't sensitive to each other's needs.

Helpful strategies for recovery from trauma

Some things you can do to reduce complications and support family recovery include:

- Remember that recovery takes time. Prepare the family members to go through a period of stress and cut back on unnecessary demands to conserve everyone's energy.
- Don't just focus on the problems. Make free time to be together and relax, or else the stress will not subside.
- Keep communicating. Make sure each family member lets the others know what is going on for them and how to help them.
- Plan regular time out and maintain activities you enjoyed before – even if you don't much feel like it. You probably will enjoy yourself if you make the effort. Enjoyment and relaxation rebuild emotional energy.
- Keep track of your family's progress in recovery and what has been achieved. Don't just keep thinking about what is still to be done.
- Stay positive and encouraging, even if at times, everyone needs to talk about their fears and worries. Remind yourself that families get through the hard times and are often stronger.

Seeking help from a health professional

Traumatic stress can cause very strong reactions in some people and may become chronic (ongoing).

You should seek professional help if you:

- are unable to handle the intense feelings or physical sensations
- don't have normal feelings, but continue to feel numb and empty
- feel that you are not beginning to return to normal after three or four weeks
- continue to have physical stress symptoms
- continue to have disturbed sleep or nightmares
- deliberately try to avoid anything that reminds you of the traumatic experience
- have no one you can share your feelings with
- find that relationships with family and friends are suffering
- are becoming accident-prone and using more alcohol or drugs

- cannot return to work or manage responsibilities
- keep reliving the traumatic experience
- feel very much on edge and can be easily startled.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local community health centre
- Medicare Local
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- When a family is affected by a crisis, everyone in the family will react in a different way.
- Understanding distress reactions and their effect on family dynamics can help the family to cope.
- Don't hesitate to seek professional help if you think your family is struggling to recover.

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