



# HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD OR TEEN AFTER WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

## SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD OR TEEN AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

### WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT AFTER A TRAUMA?

In the first days after a traumatic event, your child/teen is likely to be experiencing a range of reactions. Let them know this is normal after such a situation. They may be numb and shocked for some time. They may then experience confusion, distress, jumpiness and high anxiety. They may want to talk or they may clam up.

Such a variety of reactions are normal, and will reflect their age and stage, personality and the specific circumstances of what's happened. Most will begin to gradually feel better as time passes and things settle down more.

### YOU MAY NOTICE SOME OF THESE COMMON POST TRAUMA REACTIONS.

They may happen in first days, weeks and months – or even quite a long time after the event:

- numbness and shock – finding it hard to take in what's happened
- tearfulness or being unable to cry
- confusion and appearing disoriented
- unable to really believe what's happened
- easily distracted – finding it hard to concentrate or focus on things

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- physical responses – aches, pains, feeling sick, shaking, hot and cold
- changes in their sleep patterns
- sleeping more or less – changes in their eating patterns – eating more or less
- nightmares or flashbacks, reliving what happened, or what they think happened
- jumpy – easily frightened
- wanting to be with others a lot or withdrawing from others
- wanting to avoid school and other events for a while
- loss of trust in people or things
- a temporary regression in toileting or behavior – such as losing confidence, becoming more clingy, or bedwetting, or a downturn in school or sport results
- an up and down of emotions, or moments of particularly acute and intense emotion
- heightened anxiety including fear of separation, of the dark etc., causing clinginess and distress
- heightened anger, shown in their words or increased irritability or aggression
- heightened readiness – easily startled, on alert all the time, watching for threats around them
- some risk taking behaviours to escape the grief and pain.

## **YOU CAN DO A GREAT DEAL TO HELP A CHILD OR TEEN RECOVER**

### **Let them know that they are safe.**

Reassure them of this often. Help them to know ways to keep safe in the future if this worries them, such as having a safety plan and contact phone numbers kept handy.

**Let them know what's happened was NOT their fault** – checking in from time to time that they haven't misunderstood what's happened.

**Keep calm** and reassuring, encouraging, affectionate and loving – as best you can. Look directly at your child as you speak to them.

### **Provide a strong physical presence.**

Spend time with them and keep close to them. Have regular eye contact.

**Physical closeness** and holding brings children and teens a sense of both comfort and security. They might appreciate extra hugs, smiles, a hand held or a back rub – whatever suits each particular young person.

**Give them opportunities to talk** about their thoughts and feelings about what's happened, **if they want to**. Respect the fact that some will NOT want to talk about it at all. Perhaps let them tell their story in words, play or pictures so they can normalise their experience and have it acknowledged.

**Be honest with them.** Give them straight and simple explanations and answers. If you don't know, say so, then find out for them, if you can.

**Realise they may need to repeat some things**, such as questions, memories and stories about what's happened. This happens as they work through the event and its consequences. You may need some real patience if they want to ask about things you've already explained, or keep retelling the same stories!

**Reestablish everyday routines** as soon as possible, and sensible behaviour boundaries, while allowing some flexibility when needed.

**Keep them informed about things that have happened and things to expect.** For example, where you will be and when you'll be back if you're going away from them.

**Speak calmly about important news** and choose a time when they're not distracted.

**Increase their time with their friends, family and other support circle people**, such as a sports team or club. Great support can come from others outside family too.

**Read to them** about other children who have faced difficult times. Contact your local library or see [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz) or phone Skylight on +64 4 939 6767.

**Keep in mind that people in the same family can all react differently.** Give each person the time and space they need to process their grief in their own ways.

**Accept your child's/teen's behaviours may change at this stressful time**, but encourage and support them to gradually return to more appropriate and positive behaviours as things settle down again.

**Don't judge or tease them** about any regressive behaviour that happens, such as bed wetting, soiling, loss of confidence or clinginess. Reassure them things will come right again for them. Trauma can have a big impact for a while.

**Watch for any risk taking behaviours** in older children or teens that may happen as a way of escaping or dulling the pain, grief or memories. For example, drinking, drug taking, sexual relationships, driving fast or stupid, thoughtless behaviour, or gambling. Intervene to make sure the young person recognises the risk and get support to help manage their behaviour if you need to – such as from your doctor, family support worker, school or guidance counsellor.

**Help them to learn and use healthy coping strategies** such as: getting enough sleep, eating well, drinking enough water, doing physical exercise, talking out things with someone they trust, being allowed to ask questions, having times to play, relax and get their mind off things, spending time with friends, using the help and guidance of others, or being allowed to make, or help make, both big and small decisions. Role model some of these things yourself.

**Notice any media the child/teen is exposed to.** News coverage and images of the event may negatively affect them. Talk with them honestly if they see images or hear news.

**Sometimes opportunities to help others can help them.** It can give young people a chance to do something positive in the face of what's happened. It can relieve tension and bring hope.

**Suicidal thoughts** are possible for some vulnerable children/teens as they wrestle with what's happened. ALWAYS seek professional help immediately if you know they are having thoughts of death, and stay with them until help is provided. In an emergency, call 111.

**Find ways to remember with them how good life can still be** – sharing hope for a positive future by finding things to enjoy and things to look forward to. Let your young person know it's still okay to laugh and have good times. Life is a mix of all sorts and it helps them to know that.

### **WHEN AND HOW SHOULD I GET HELP FOR MY CHILD?**

Look again at the list of common responses after trauma. These are not uncommon in the first days and weeks after a trauma. However, if they continue for months, if you're ever concerned that these changes seem to be getting extreme or worse, if other things are concerning you about your child/teen, or if you think your child is at risk of harm, don't hesitate to talk to your child's doctor, a mental health team, a trained counsellor or a support worker from a local family support agency. Get help and support as soon as you can. (Your local citizens advice office or medical centre will know of the ones nearest to you, or check your local community phone directory.)

### **IF YOU EVER THINK THE YOUNG PERSON IS AT RISK OF HARMING THEMSELVES... OR OTHERS**

Get immediate and professional help and support for them. Don't hesitate to do this. Stay with them until help is provided. In an emergency always dial **111**.

### **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AS WELL**

Take the time you need to process your own thoughts, feelings and reactions. Don't put this off. It's important. You'll then be better able to provide the security, encouragement, comfort and ongoing reassurance the child or teen needs. Remember what they say on the planes? Put your own oxygen mask on first!!

- **Take time out to relax and release your own stress.**
- **Find a trusted person to talk to**
- **Use local support, such as Skylight or Victim Support, if you think some support could be helpful.**
- **Use some support resources – see Skylight's website at [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)**
- **Consider going to see a counsellor, to help you work through what's happened.**
- **Talking to other parents/adults involved in the situation might be very helpful.**
- **Get enough sleep, rest, healthy food, water and exercise. Make it a priority.**

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