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# Trauma

workers



A traumatic event is something which threatens a person's life or safety, or that of the people around them. It might be a natural disaster such as a bushfire, flood or earthquake, or a serious accident, or a physical or sexual assault. Up to 65% of Australians are likely to experience a traumatic event at some stage in their lives.

Traumatic events are usually unexpected and do not allow people time to prepare for them. They are often very different to anything experienced before, and can be difficult to make sense of. They might cause people to question things that they previously thought were true, such as their safety in the world and their control over their lives. Much of the distress that follows a traumatic event can be caused by the shattering of their previous sense of security and stability. Trauma can be especially challenging for young people, who are still learning about themselves, establishing their identity, and gaining independence from their parents.

Young people respond to traumatic events in many different ways, depending on their past experiences, personality, levels of support and the nature of the event. Most young people will cope well and make a good recovery, but a few will have long-term problems.

In the period immediately after the event, however, it is normal to experience strong emotions and feelings. These can include:

- Emotional numbness – feeling cut-off from what happened
- Shock and disbelief
- Fear – for example of death or injury, being alone, not being able to cope, or the event happening again
- Helplessness – having no control
- Guilt or shame – for not having stopped the event, being better off than others, not reacting in the best way or not coping well enough

- Sadness – for things that have been lost
- Isolation – feeling that no-one understands or can help
- Euphoria – joy at being alive and safe
- Anger and frustration – about the event, and its unfairness
- Re-experiencing of the event – through dreams, flashbacks or thoughts
- Changes in relationships – some people may seem unsupportive or unavailable, others might seem closer than previously

Some young people may experience other physical and behavioural reactions, including:

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Racing heart
- Shaking, sweating
- Sleep difficulties
- Trouble concentrating
- Emotional distress, including mood swings or anxiety
- Difficulty with school or work
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulties with normal daily activities
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Increased substance use

## How to support a young person who has experienced a traumatic event

Most young people will recover well with the support of family, friends and their community, but workers can provide additional help and support:

- Practical and emotional support can help the young person regain a sense of safety and control in their life
- Provide information about common reactions to traumatic experiences and normalise their physical and emotional responses
- Encourage the young person to spend time with family, friends and other trusted people
- Limiting their access to media coverage of the event may be helpful – information is important, but too much can reinforce distress



- Encourage the young person to re-establish their normal routines such as meal times, sleep, work, study and relaxation

If the adverse effects of the trauma are generally mild and have been present for less than four weeks, practical and emotional support is usually sufficient, with follow-up arranged within one month.

It's normal to want to talk about a traumatic event: it helps

to make sense of what has happened, and what it means for the person and their life. However, this should be entirely voluntary, and with someone they trust or a health professional. It should occur only when they feel ready, and when they can manage their distress.

Note that critical incident stress debriefing (often referred to as 'debriefing') is not supported by the available evidence, and should not be part of routine practice.

## What are post-traumatic mental health problems?

Although most young people begin to recover from a traumatic experience within weeks, some will have persisting or worsening symptoms. This can increase their risk of developing mental health problems such as

depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or problems with substance use. If they do develop, then these problems can be treated, but they need proper assessment by a health professional.

## Supporting a young person in seeking help

A mental health problem may be developing if the young person experiences changes which:

- Persist for more than two weeks
- Worsen over time
- Affect their ability to participate in activities they enjoy, their school work, or their relationships
- Are distressing
- Lead to thoughts of harming themselves or someone else

If symptoms of trauma are left untreated, they can have a significant effect on a young person's social, emotional, behavioural and physical development. Getting help early can reduce the likely effect of mental health problems on their life and improve the chances of a full recovery.

Young people can often be reluctant to seek professional help, so it is important to find someone they trust and feel comfortable with. If they have had a positive experience with a GP or counsellor in the past, encourage them to contact that person again. You could also help them to contact their local community health centre or **headspace** centre.

Effective interventions in young people with PTSD symptoms include individual and group cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). There is strong evidence to support the use of trauma-focused CBT, combining anxiety reduction techniques (for example, relaxation), exposure (for example, thinking or writing about the event) and cognitive work (reframing and challenging unhelpful thoughts).

## Self-care for workers

Supporting people who have experienced trauma can also have an impact on you as a worker. You may feel physically and emotionally exhausted, overwhelmed or distressed by the young person's experience, or feel traumatised yourself. Looking after yourself and getting support to manage these

difficult feelings is important for your own wellbeing, and will also help you to better support the young person.

For more information visit, and to find out how to get help, visit **headspace.org.au**

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