

Trauma

About trauma

A traumatic event is something that threatens your life or safety, or the lives of people around you. It is an experience that is stressful and has a significant impact on your emotional state.

A traumatic event might be a natural disaster, such as a bushfire, flood or earthquake, or it might be as a result of a serious accident, a physical or sexual assault, losing someone close to you, or something else. Trauma can also be experienced across many repeated traumatic events (such as ongoing abuse, neglect or violence).

65% of Australians have experienced a traumatic event 

Experiencing some trauma is common, with up to 65% of Australians experiencing a traumatic event at some stage in their lives¹. Trauma can be especially challenging for young people as they are still learning about themselves, establishing their identity and gaining independence. Young people respond to traumatic events in many different ways and this depends on their past experiences, personality, levels of support, level of exposure to trauma and the nature of the event. Most young people will make a good recovery but a few will have longer-term problems.

Getting support soon after the traumatic experience can make a big difference to a person's recovery.

Effects of trauma

After a traumatic event it is normal for a young person to experience strong emotions and feelings. These can include:



Emotional numbness and detachment – feeling cut-off from what happened, other people, and themselves



Shock and disbelief – that the event has happened



Fear – of death or injury, being alone, not being able to cope, or the event happening again



Helplessness – feeling that they have 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 gone or been lost



Isolation – feeling that no-one understands or can help



Euphoria – joy at being alive and safe



Anger and frustration – about the event or the unfairness of the situation



Re-experiencing the event – through dreams, flashbacks or thoughts



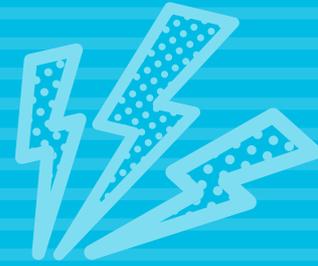
Changes in relationships – some people may seem unsupportive or unavailable while others might seem closer than before.

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

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Racing heart
- Shaking or sweating
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Emotional distress, including mood swings, anxiety or a quick temper
- Difficulty with school or work
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulties with normal daily activities
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Increased use of alcohol and other drugs
- Avoiding situations that remind them of the traumatic experience
- Increased alertness or watchfulness.

These reactions are normal and usually begin to lessen in the days and weeks after a traumatic event.

Trauma



How can family and friends provide support?

Support from the family is extremely important for young people following a traumatic experience. Most young people will recover well with the support of family, friends and their community. Being with familiar and caring people helps them to regain a sense of safety and re-establish normal routines.

To help young people through the process of recovery, there are some things that you can do:

- **Acknowledge the trauma** that they have experienced – let them know that you are there for them and are ready to listen and support them
- **Provide information** about common reactions to traumatic experiences and normalise their physical and emotional responses
- **Encourage them to spend time with family**, friends and other trusted people
- **Limit their access to media coverage of the traumatic event** – information is important, but too much can reinforce distress
- **Encourage them to re-establish their normal routines** such as meal times, sleep, work, study and relaxation
- **Join them in doing enjoyable activities**
- **Let them talk about their experience when they feel ready.** This can help them to begin to make sense of what has happened and to try to understand what it means for them and their life.

What are post-traumatic mental health problems?

Although most young people begin to recover from a traumatic experience over the weeks following the experience 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.

Possible signs of a mental health problem include changes in behaviour or mood, and any of the effects of trauma that:

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



It has been estimated that 2-8% of adolescents will develop PTSD at some point in their lifetime². 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.

Supporting young people to seek help

Supporting a young person to find a health professional such as a general practitioner (GP) or counsellor who they trust and feel comfortable with is important. If they've had a positive experience with a family GP or another health professional in the past it might be helpful to encourage them to

contact them again. You could also support them to contact your local community health centre or **headspace** centre. Psychological treatments, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), can help young people who have symptoms of PTSD.

Supporting someone who has been through trauma can be a very difficult experience so be sure to get the support you need as well.



For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

References: ¹ Creamer et al. (2001), Post-traumatic stress disorder: findings from the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being, Psychological Medicine, 2001; 31 (7):1237-1247. <https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/6593/1/hdl6593.pdf>. ² Merikangas et al. (2010), Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in US Adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Study-Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A), J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry. 2010 Oct; 49(10): 980-989. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2946114/>

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