



Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents

As parents, we want our children to go through life without experiencing any kind of pain or stress, but every day children around the world experience traumatic events: from natural disasters like hurricanes to man-made events such as car accidents, crime, or abuse.

WHAT IS CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS?

Although many of us may experience reactions to stress from time to time, when a child is experiencing child traumatic stress, these reactions interfere with his or her daily life and ability to function and interact with others.

Examples of traumatic events include:

- Natural disasters such as hurricanes, or tornadoes
- Accidents or injuries
- House fire
- Acts of terrorism
- Crime
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Violence within the family
- Community violence such as school shootings
- Physical or sexual assault
- Traumatic loss, such as the murder of a parent or sibling
- Serious medical illnesses

If your child is experiencing traumatic stress, you might notice the following signs:

- Difficulty sleeping and nightmares
- Refusing to go to school/difficulty with schoolwork
- Lack of appetite
- Depressive symptoms/ Anxiety/ Nervousness or jumpiness
- Bed-wetting or other regression in behavior
- Anger/ Getting into fights at school or with siblings
- Difficulty paying attention to teachers and parents
- Avoidance of scary situations
- Withdrawal from friends or activities
- Unpleasant memories of what happened



How often does trauma happen?

Unfortunately, traumatic events happen often. Some families have more than one traumatic event. When there is trauma, at first people feel shocked, upset and unable to cope. When families experience many traumatic events, called complex trauma, they can find it hard to support each other or meet the needs of their children. Some teens show few, if any, problems because of a traumatic event. Others may experience intense physical and emotional responses. This traumatic stress response can lead to long-lasting problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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WHAT IS PTSD?

PTSD is an intense emotional and physical reaction that can be caused by experiencing a traumatic event. Symptoms usually begin within three months of the traumatic incident, but can begin later. For symptoms to be considered PTSD, they must last more than a month and be severe enough to affect functioning in relationships, school or work. It is important for anyone with PTSD to be treated by a mental health professional who is experienced with PTSD. The main treatments are psychotherapy (“talk” therapy), medications or both.

Accurate assessment is important because it helps clinicians choose the best treatment possible. Children and adolescents with a single traumatic experience or complex trauma may have a wide range of symptoms. How a child reacts depends on age, experiences, personality, strengths and individual vulnerabilities.

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO TO COPE WITH TRAUMATIC STRESS:

It is natural to want to “put the past behind you” and not think or talk about the bad things that happened. While each person in the family may behave differently, families can manage fear and stress and feel safer when they spend time together talking about their feelings, and return to everyday routines. Some families get better with time and the support of others, while other families may need help from trauma treatments. When seeking help, your family can:

- Talk to a doctor, school counselor, or spiritual leader about the family’s trauma event
- Find a therapist who has helped families overcome traumatic stress
- Look for trauma treatments that help all members of the family
- Learn about trauma and its effects
- Recognize and build on the family’s strengths
- Talk about ways to get the family back on track



In the U.S.:

- Four out of 10 adolescents have witnessed violence.
- One in four teen girls was verbally or physically pressured into having sex during the past year.
- Nearly a third of U.S. youth age 12-17 have experienced two or more types of childhood adversity that are likely to affect their physical and mental health as adults.
- One in three teens is a victim of sexual or other abuse by a dating partner each year.
- Nearly 35 million U.S. children have experienced one or more types of childhood trauma.

NCTSN.org

To make an appointment, call 314-286-1700.

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