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# Trauma and teenagers - common reactions

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## Summary

- Teenagers tend to seesaw between independence and insecurity after a distressing event.
  - A teenager may be deeply upset by such an event, but not share their feelings with their parents.
  - Seek professional advice if you are worried about your teenager.
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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.

Teenagers who experience a distressing or frightening event are often concerned by these strong emotions. Despite the fact that these reactions usually subside as a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process, it is important for parents or carers to understand the ways in which a teenager manages distress and trauma so they can support and help the young person.

Teenagers can also be deeply upset by local, national or international tragedies, or trauma that affects their friends. Your teenager will handle trauma differently to younger children or adults. A younger child depends directly on their family, whereas many teenagers look to their peer group for support. In order to help them, parents need to understand the ways in which teenagers manage distress.

## Common reactions to trauma in teenagers

Every young person is different, but common symptoms of distress include:

- strong emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety and guilt
- overreacting to minor irritations
- repetitively thinking about the traumatic event and talking about it often
- disturbed sleeping patterns
- withdrawing from family and friends
- wanting to spend more time alone
- being very protective of family and friends
- returning to younger ways of behaving including giving up responsibilities or a sudden return to rebellious behaviour
- increased need for independence
- self-absorption and caring only about what is immediately important
- loss of interest in school, friends, hobbies, and life in general
- pessimistic outlook on life, being cynical and distrusting of others
- depression and feelings of hopelessness
- difficulties with short-term memory, concentration and problem solving.

## **Normal healing and recovery process after trauma**

Any event that places your life or the lives of others at risk results in your body going into a state of heightened arousal. This is like an 'emergency mode' that involves a series of internal alarms being turned on. Emergency mode gives people the capacity to access a lot of energy in a short period of time to maximise the chance of survival.

Most people only stay in emergency mode for a short period of time or until the immediate threat has passed. However, being in emergency mode uses up vital energy supplies and this is why people often feel quite tired afterwards.

The normal healing and recovery process involves your body coming down out of a state of heightened arousal. In other words, your internal alarms turn off, the high levels of energy subside, and your body re-sets itself to a normal state of balance and equilibrium. Typically, this should occur within about one month of the event.

## **Adolescence and independence**

The transition from child to adult can be rocky. A teenager may lose the confidence they had as a child. Unlike a younger child, a teenager isn't as dependent on their family. A younger child realises they couldn't survive without their parents, whereas a teenager is more aware of their ability to make it 'on their own'.

For teenagers, friends and peer groups are very important. By comparing themselves with their friends, a teenager gets a sense of how 'normal' they are. Teenagers tend to seesaw between independence and insecurity after a distressing event. This sort of contradictory behaviour can be confusing to the teenager and to the parents trying to help them.

## **Breakdowns in communication**

A teenager may be deeply upset by the event, but despite this, they may not want to share their feelings with their parents.

Some of the reasons for this include that they:

- are needing more time to absorb what has happened
- are not wanting to acknowledge the event by talking about it
- don't want to upset their parents
- are wanting to be strong for parents and other family members
- don't think their parents will understand them
- think that parents will tell them what to feel or what to do
- don't agree with their parents' point of view on the event
- prefer to talk to their peers about it
- find instead that peers help take their mind off the event
- feel confused about how they think and feel about the event
- don't know how to express complicated, unfamiliar thoughts
- are frightened of strong feelings and fear they are 'losing the plot'
- would rather distract themselves than think about the event
- already have a problem with communication before the event.

## **Family problems that can develop after a traumatic event**

Family problems can occur if:

- the family doesn't talk about the event
- the family misunderstands the teenager's behaviour and assumes the teenager is just being difficult or taking advantage of the situation
- parents try to keep the teenager from their peer group or criticise their choice of friends
- parents feel hurt or angry because the teenager prefers to talk to friends about the event rather than the family
- the family argues over different points of view
- parents try to get emotional support from the teenager.

## Tips to help teenagers resolve traumatic reactions

There are a number of strategies that can be put in place to help a teenager resolve traumatic reactions.

Some common suggestions include:

- Encourage the young person to communicate without judging or advising them until they ask for your feedback.
- Show them that you really care for them and are genuinely interested and enjoy being with them.
- Negotiate changes in roles and responsibilities during recovery and be flexible. Don't try to stick rigidly to the way things were before the event.
- Continue to give love, support and trust, even if things are extremely difficult.
- Remember your teenager is the same person they were before the event, even if they seem different.
- If asked, gently let the young person know that they are having a 'normal' reaction to a frightening experience and that in time these very strong reactions will subside.

## When to seek help from a health professional after a traumatic event

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

Signs that you should seek professional help include:

- Their behaviour is dangerous, reckless or harmful.
- They seem persistently depressed or anxious.
- They start abusing substances, such as cigarettes or alcohol, or their use increases dramatically.
- They won't communicate about where they're going, what they're doing or how they're feeling.
- They don't seem to be showing any signs of recovery.
- Your teenager's behaviour does not make sense to you and seem completely out of character.
- You are worried about them for any reason at all.

**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 GP (doctor)**
- Local community health centre

- **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 Find a Psychologist Service** Tel. 1800 333 497