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# Trauma and teenagers - tips for parents

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## Summary

- The way you help your teenager to handle a distressing or frightening event will influence their behaviour in future crises.
  - Your teenager will experience strong and sometimes difficult emotions while they recover, such as moodiness and sensitivity.
  - Seek professional help if your teenager is persistently depressed or anxious, or if they seem to be struggling to cope in any way.
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It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing event. However, teenagers who experience a distressing or frightening event are often concerned by these strong emotions.

Despite the fact that on most occasions these reactions 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. The ways you help them to handle a distressing event will influence their behaviour in future crises.

## Experiencing a traumatic event

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.

Examples of potentially traumatic experiences include natural disasters such as a bushfire or flood, experiencing violence in the community, having a serious car accident, sudden illness or death in the family, or being assaulted.

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.

## Maintain open communication with your teenager

You can be sure that the event, particularly if it has been in the media, is a hot topic at school and on social networking sites. It is important to create an atmosphere that lets your teenager know it is okay to talk about the experience they have had.

Leading by example is one way to do this, but other suggestions include:

- It's natural to want to protect your child from harsh realities, but avoiding talking about the event will only increase your teenager's anxiety. When it seems appropriate, 'check in' with your teenager and ask them how they are going. Parents can set a good example by talking about aspects of their own experience with one another in front of children. That is, talk about the event as a family. Share thoughts and feelings.

- Remember feelings of distress, anger or grief are a natural part of healing and expressing them usually leads to feeling better.
- Tell them about distress and grief reactions. They need reassurance that what they're feeling is normal.
- Don't expect or demand that your teenager will feel a certain way about the event. Respect their emotions and beliefs, even if you don't necessarily agree or understand them.
- If the event directly affected your family, your teenager may not talk to you for fear of upsetting you. Let them know that sharing thoughts and feelings together as a family is helpful to every family member, even if the conversations are painful.

## **Help your teenager to gain perspective**

A distressing or frightening event shakes a person's belief in the security and predictability of their world. Teenagers can feel particularly overwhelmed and anxious.

Some of the ways in which you can help them gain perspective in order to regain a sense of control include:

- Help your teenager to find out as much as they can about what happened and why. Cause and effect is very important. However, make sure that you obtain information from reputable and reliable sources such as government internet sites.
- While honest facts are essential, don't dwell on gruesome details or give additional unnecessary information that may simply add to their distress. It is about finding the balance between too little and too much information. A teenager may feel the world is threatening and dangerous, particularly in the case of well-publicised human tragedies such as natural disasters or acts of terrorism. Help them to appreciate that for every terrible act, there are many more people in the world trying to make things right. Sometimes, it is a good idea to identify concrete examples before having this conversation with your teenager.
- Consideration should also be given to the potential benefit of limiting their exposure to mainstream media.

## **Understand and be patient with your teenager**

Your teenager will experience strong and sometimes difficult emotions such as moodiness and sensitivity, while they recover.

Suggestions to help them during this period of time include:

- Expect that your teenager will be emotional for a time and cut them some slack.
- Your teenager may become rebellious. This reflects their need to assert control over their lives. It may help if you sit down together and negotiate ways in which your child can safely 'lead their own life' while still obeying house rules.
- Your teenager may be angry with the family or with the people they blame for the event or even with the world in general. Try not to get into arguments about their point of view. Their feelings are part of their distress reaction and they have the right to express themselves.
- Your teenager may seem to not want your support. They may turn to friends instead, at least in the short term. Keep the lines of communication open. Let your teenager know you are always ready and available to talk.
- Your teenager may become clingy. Give them plenty of love and reassurance.
- 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.

# Trauma can change your teenager's friendships

Trauma can change a teenager's relationships with their friends.

Some tips if you notice this happening with your teenager include:

- Explain to them that friends, teachers and other people in their lives who were not directly affected by the traumatic event will forget about it quickly. This means that it will be very difficult for these people to actually understand the experience they are having.
- Tell them that their friends may not have the experience or emotional maturity to support them in the ways they might expect. This sometimes comes as a surprise.
- Explain that friends may drop contact because they don't know what to say, not because they don't care.
- Your teenager may withdraw from their friends if they feel misunderstood. Don't push this. Suggest to them that their experience has matured them and that it is normal to find activities with friends a little empty or meaningless for a time.
- Try to encourage your teenager to make time for fun and to continue to 'hang out' with friends just for the pleasure of it.
- If your teenager is a little resistant to spending time with their friends, you can always suggest that the friend(s) comes to visit or alternatively a joint family outing could be arranged.

## School performance following trauma

It is not unusual for a teenager's school performance to suffer in the short term following a distressing event.

To help them, you can:

- Make sure that school staff, including teachers and the principal, are aware of what has happened.
- Ask teachers to let you know how your teenager is going and how they are managing schoolwork and other responsibilities. For example, arranging regular times to obtain feedback from the school can be beneficial. (Keeping an eye on their progress outside the home will give you warning of problems that need attention.)
- Make sure you tell your teenager about your conversations with teachers and your reasons. To go behind their back is to invade their privacy. Remember, the most important thing here is to keep the lines of communication open as this will create an atmosphere of positive support.

## Encourage your teenager to take action

Teenagers can be deeply disturbed by local, national and international tragedies. Taking action is a powerful remedy for the helplessness they feel. Encourage your teenager to make a difference.

Depending on the circumstance, the ways in which your teenager could help include:

- helping to raise funds for relief agencies
- sending sympathy messages to affected people
- donating blood
- getting involved in certain recovery-related activities
- volunteering at school or university to participate in certain projects.

## Practical suggestions to support your teenager

There are a number of strategies that can be put in place to help a teenager resolve traumatic reactions. Some common examples include:

- Maintain your regular household routine, whenever possible.
- Try to make sure your teenager eats well, gets enough sleep and keeps up regular exercise.
- Help them to deal with distress in healthy, positive ways. For example, exercise, relaxation exercises and meditation are helpful.
- Make time for fun family activities.
- Show them that you really care for them and are genuinely interested and enjoy being with them.
- Negotiate changes in roles and responsibility during their recovery. Be flexible. Don't try to stick rigidly to the way things were before the event.

## When to seek professional help for a teenager after trauma

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

Signs that you should seek professional help include if:

- 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