

Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events

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Children and teens are more vulnerable to being traumatized by the coronavirus pandemic, violent crime, or other disasters. But with the right parental support, they're also able to recover faster.

The effects of trauma on children and teens

Being involved in the COVID-19 pandemic, a serious accident, violent crime, terrorist attack, or natural disaster, such as an earthquake or hurricane, can be overwhelmingly stressful for children. A disaster, crisis, or other troubling event can cause traumatic stress, undermine your child's sense of security, and leave them feeling helpless and vulnerable—especially if the event stemmed from an act of violence, such as a mass shooting or terrorist attack. Even kids or teens not directly affected by a disaster can become traumatized when repeatedly exposed to horrific images of the event on the news or social media.

Whether your child lived through the disturbing event itself, witnessed it, or experienced traumatic stress in the aftermath, they're likely to be affected by an array of intense, confusing, and frightening emotions. While unpleasant symptoms may fade over time, there's plenty you can do as a parent or guardian to support and reassure a traumatized child. Using these coping tips, you can help your child manage symptoms of traumatic stress, rebuild their sense of safety, and move on from the traumatic event.

Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress in kids and teens

Traumatic stress is a normal reaction to a natural or manmade disaster or other disturbing event. It can leave children of any age feeling overwhelmed by stress and trigger a wide range of intense emotions and physical or behavioral reactions. These in turn can affect your child's mood, appetite, sleep, and overall well-being.

Signs of Trauma in Kids and Teens

Infants under age 2 may:

- Fuss more or be harder to soothe
- Exhibit changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Appear withdrawn

Children age 2 to 5 may:

- Show signs of fear
- [Cling to parent](#) or caregiver more
- Cry, scream, or whine
- Move aimlessly or freeze up
- Regress to earlier childhood behaviors, such as thumb sucking or bedwetting

Children age 6 to 11 may:

- Lose interest in friends, family, or activities they used to enjoy
- Experience [nightmares or other sleep problems](#)
- Become moody, disruptive, or angry
- Struggle with school and homework
- Complain of physical problems such as headaches or stomachaches
- Develop unfounded fears
- Feel depressed, emotionally numb, or guilty over what happened

Adolescents age 12 to 17 may:

- Have flashbacks to the event, suffer from nightmares or other sleep problems
- Avoid reminders of the event
- Abuse alcohol, drugs, or nicotine products
- Act disruptive, disrespectful, or aggressive
- Complain of physical ailments
- Feel isolated, guilty, or [depressed](#)
- Lose interest in hobbies and interests
- Have [suicidal thoughts](#)

Whatever the age of your child, it's important to offer extra reassurance and support following a traumatic event. With your love and guidance, the unsettling thoughts and feelings of traumatic stress can start to fade and your child's life can return to normal in the days or weeks following the crisis or disturbing event.

Helping your child cope with a disaster or traumatic event

Your child's reaction to a disaster or traumatic event can be greatly influenced by your own response. Children of all ages—even independence-seeking teenagers—look to their parents for comfort and reassurance at times of crisis. If you experienced the traumatic event alongside your child, it's crucial to take steps to [cope with your own traumatic stress](#). Even young infants can pick up on their parents' anxiety and stress. By taking care of your own emotional health and well-being, you'll be more of a calming influence and better able to help your child. Since the childhood impulse to imitate is strong, if your child sees you taking steps to cope with the effects of the trauma, they're likely to follow.

You can also:

Remember that children react to trauma in different ways. And their feelings can come and go in waves. Your child may be moody and withdrawn at certain times, frozen with grief and fear at other times. There's no "right" or "wrong" way to feel after a traumatic event so don't try to dictate what your child should be thinking or feeling.

Encourage your child to openly share their feelings. Let them know that whatever feelings they're experiencing are normal. Even unpleasant feelings will pass if your child opens up about them. While many teens may be reluctant to talk about their feelings with a parent, encourage them to confide in another trusted adult such as a family friend, relative, teacher, or religious figure. It's important to talk—even if it's not with you.

Allow them to grieve any losses. Give your child time to heal and to [mourn any losses](#) they may have experienced as a result of the disaster or traumatic event. That could be the loss of a friend, relative, pet, home, or simply the way their life used to be.

Discourage your child from obsessively reliving the traumatic event. Continually dwelling on or replaying footage of the event can overwhelm your child's nervous system. Encourage activities that keep your child's mind occupied so they're not solely focusing on the traumatic event. You could read to your child, play games together, or simply watch an uplifting movie.

De-stress as a family. Even young children can use simple breathing exercises to relieve stress and feel more at ease in the world, while older kids may be able to master other [relaxation techniques](#).

Kids and trauma recovery tip 1: Rebuild trust and safety

Trauma can alter the way a child or teen sees the world, making it suddenly seem a much more dangerous and frightening place. Your child may find it more difficult to trust both their environment and other people. You can help by rebuilding your child's sense of safety and security.

Make your child feel safe again. Hugging and reassuring can help make a child of any age feel secure. While teens may try to tough it out and avoid being held, your physical affection is still important in making them feel safe again.

Encourage your child to pursue activities they enjoy. Try to make sure your child has space and time for rest, play, and fun.

Maintain routines. Establishing a predictable structure and schedule to your child's life can help to make the world seem more stable again. Try to maintain regular times for meals, homework, and family activities.

Speak of the future and make plans. This can help counteract the common feeling among traumatized children that the future is scary, bleak, and unpredictable.

Keep your promises. You can help to rebuild your child's trust by being trustworthy. Be consistent and follow through on what you say you're going to do.

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to admit it. Don't jeopardize your child's trust in you by making something up.

Remember that children often personalize situations. They may worry about their own safety even if the traumatic event occurred far away. Reassure your child and help place the situation in context.

Tip 2: Minimize media exposure

Children who've experienced a traumatic event can often find relentless media coverage to be further traumatizing. Excessive exposure to images of a crisis or disturbing event—such as repeatedly viewing video clips on social media or news sites—can even create traumatic stress in children or teens who were not directly affected by the event.

Limit your child's media exposure to the traumatic event. Don't let your child watch the news or [check social media](#) just before bed, and make use of parental controls on the TV, computer, and phone to prevent your child from repeatedly viewing disturbing footage.

As much as you can, watch news reports of the traumatic event with your child. You can reassure your child as you're watching and help place information in context.

Avoid exposing your child to graphic images and videos. It's often less traumatizing for a child or teen to read the newspaper rather than watch television coverage or view video clips of the event.

Tip 3: Engage your child

You can't will your child to recover from a traumatic experience, but you can play a major role in the healing process by simply spending time together and talking face to face—free from TV, phones, video games, and other distractions. Do your best to create an environment where your kids feel safe to communicate what they're feeling and to ask questions.

Provide your child with ongoing opportunities to talk about what they went through or what they're seeing in the media. Encourage them to ask questions and express their concerns but don't force them to talk.

Communicate with your child in an age-appropriate way. Younger children, for example, will respond to reassuring hugs and simple phrases such as "It's over now" or "It's all going to be okay." Older children, though, will draw more comfort from hearing facts and information about what happened.

Acknowledge and validate your child's concerns. The traumatic event may bring up unrelated fears and issues in your child. Comfort for your child comes from feeling understood and accepted by you, so acknowledge their fears even if they don't seem relevant to you.

Reassure your child. The event was not their fault, you love them, and it's okay for them to feel upset, angry, or scared.

Don't pressure your child into talking. It can be very difficult for some kids to talk about a traumatic experience. A young child may find it easier to draw a picture illustrating their feelings rather than talk about them. You can then talk with your child about what they've drawn.

Be honest. While you should tailor the information you share according to your child's age and personality, honesty is important. Don't say nothing's wrong if something *is* wrong.

Do “normal” activities with your child that have nothing to do with the traumatic event. Encourage your child to seek out friends and pursue games, sports, and hobbies that they enjoyed before the incident. Go on family outings to the park, enjoy a games night, or watch a movie together.

Tip 4: Encourage physical activity

[Physical activity](#) can burn off adrenaline, release mood-enhancing endorphins, and help your child or teen sleep better at night.

Find a sport that your child enjoys. Activities such as basketball, soccer, running, martial arts, or swimming that require moving both the arms and legs can help rouse your child's nervous system from that “stuck” feeling that often follows a traumatic experience.

Offer to participate in sports, games, or physical activities with your child. If they seem resistant to get off the couch, play some of their favorite music and dance together. Once a child gets moving, they'll start to feel more energetic.

Encourage your child to go outside to play with friends or a pet and blow off steam.

Schedule a family outing to a hiking trail, lake, or beach. Spending time in nature can ease stress and boost a child's overall mood.

Take younger children to a playground, activity center, or arrange play dates.

Tip 5: Feed your child a healthy diet

The [food your child eats](#) can have a profound impact on their mood and ability to cope with traumatic stress. Processed and convenience food, [refined carbohydrates, and sugary drinks and snacks](#) can create mood swings and worsen symptoms of traumatic stress. Conversely, eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and [healthy fats](#), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help your child or teen better cope with the ups and downs that follow a disturbing experience.

Focus on overall diet rather than specific foods. Kids should be eating whole, minimally processed food—food that is as close to its natural form as possible.

Limit fried food, sweet desserts, sugary snacks and cereals, and refined flour. These can all negatively affect a child's mood.

Cook more meals at home. Restaurant and takeout meals have more added sugar and unhealthy fat so [cooking at home](#) can have a huge impact on your kids' health. If you make large batches, cooking just a few times can be enough to feed your family for the whole week.

Make mealtimes about more than just food. Gathering the family around a table for a meal is an ideal opportunity to talk and listen to your child without the distraction of TV, phones, or computers.

When to seek treatment for your child's trauma

Usually, your child's feelings of anxiety, numbness, confusion, guilt, and despair following a crisis, disaster, or other traumatic event will start to fade within a relatively short time. However, if the traumatic stress reaction is so intense that it interferes with your child's ability to function at school or home—or if the symptoms don't begin to fade or even become worse over time—they may need help from a mental health professional.

When traumatic stress symptoms don't ease up and your child's nervous system remains "stuck," unable to move on from the event for a prolonged period of time, they may be experiencing [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

Warning signs include:

- Six weeks have passed, and your child is not feeling any better
- Your child is having trouble functioning at school
- Your child is experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- The symptoms of traumatic stress manifest as physical complaints such as headaches, stomach pains, or sleep disturbances
- Your child is having an increasingly difficult time relating to friends and family
- Your child or teen is experiencing suicidal thoughts
- Your child is avoiding more and more things that remind them of the traumatic event

Suicide prevention in traumatized kids and teens

Take any suicidal talk or behavior seriously. It's not just a warning sign that your child or teen is thinking about suicide—it's a cry for help. Please read [Suicide Prevention](#) or call a suicide helpline:

- In the U.S., call [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-8255.
- In Canada, call [Crisis Services Canada](#) at 1-833-456-4566.
- Pour les résidents du Québec, composez le 1 866 APPELLE (1-866-277-3553).