

Parents Can Help

Children can and do recover from traumatic events. As parents, you play an important role in helping your children and your family cope with the stress reactions that can follow these events. Try to maintain a balanced perspective. On one hand, do take your child's reactions seriously. Don't say that "It wasn't so bad." Don't think "If we don't make a big deal, she will forget all about it." On the other hand, don't decide that the trauma was so bad that your child will never recover. Instead, try to maintain a hopeful belief that your child will heal and that your family will recover from the event as well.

Family members may each react differently to a traumatic event that a child has experienced. Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that each of your family members may have a different reaction to a traumatic event. Reactions will differ, depending not only on the family member's age, developmental level, and own trauma history, but also on his or her relationship with the child and personal exposure to the event. For example, one may have shared the child's experience, another may have witnessed it, still another may have heard about it after the fact. While all family members may be upset, only some will have posttraumatic stress reactions themselves; each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience.

While your world may feel changed forever after a traumatic event, you, your children and family members, and your community are more resilient than you might imagine. You do have a great ability to heal and return to feeling "normal" again.

What can my family do to recover?

You can help your family recover by doing the following:

- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Try not to push your child to "just get over it." Instead, reassure him or her that they do not need to feel guilty or bad about any feelings or thoughts.
- Explain to your child that he or she is not responsible for what happened. Children often blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control.
- Assure your child that he or she is safe. Talk about the measures you are taking to keep him or her safe at home and about what measures his/her school is taking to ensure his or her safety at school.
- Maintain regular home (mealtime, bedtime) and school routines to support the process of recovery. Make sure your child continues to go to school and stays in school.

- Learn about the common reactions that children have to traumatic events.
- Take time to think about your own experience of your child's traumatic event and any past traumatic events you may have experienced. Your own trauma history and your feelings about your child's trauma event will influence how you react.
- Consult a qualified mental health professional if your child's distress continues for several weeks. Ask your child's primary care physician or school for a referral to a mental health provider who has experience with child traumatic stress.

When family members care for and support each other, they can often overcome the fears and stress of trauma. Some families grow stronger after a traumatic event and are even able to help others in need. Of the many ways to cope and heal from traumatic stress, many families count on these:

- Community support
- Spiritual beliefs
- Friends and other families

Even with the support of family members and others, some children do not heal. When distress continues for several weeks, a mental health professional trained in trauma care can help the whole family cope with the effects of traumatic events. Finding the right professional, however, can be confusing.

There is no correct timetable for recovery. Some children will recover quickly. Others recover more slowly. Some families get better with time and the support of others. As a general rule, if your child's reactions (nightmares, recurrent thoughts, fears) have been getting worse instead of better, or your family is having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting your children's needs, you should seek a referral for a qualified mental health professional (psychologist, clinical social worker, psychiatrist) with experience in assessing and treating child traumatic stress or posttraumatic stress disorder. Going without help can have long-lasting negative consequences. Fortunately, however, entering treatment can have concrete, beneficial results that will help your child and your family feel better, grow stronger, and recover.