

Your Reaction to Trauma: Suggestions for Teens

Trauma can change the way you view your world. You may feel unsafe and insecure about situations and places you normally would enjoy. Your reactions to trauma will depend upon how closely you were involved with the people involved in the trauma, your personality makeup, your normal way of handling situations, and the type and amount of support you have in your life. It is common for youth, like you, to have difficulty controlling your emotions or to become disinterested in normal activities. A constructive way to view this situation is that you are normal kids experiencing a traumatic world event.

It is natural for you to first experience some sort of denial. Fears, worries or nightmares are common following a trauma. Sleep disturbances or eating difficulties may happen. Also, you may begin to regress emotionally or act younger than your age. You may become more clingy, unhappy and needy of parental attention and comfort. Feelings of irritability, anger, sadness or guilt may often emerge. Somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches or swelling are not unusual. You may repeatedly relive the trauma by acting it out in activities or dreams. Other youth, like you, may seek to avoid all reminders of the trauma by withdrawing from relationships, refusing to discuss their feelings, or avoiding activities that remind them of the people or places associated with the trauma. Some loss of interest in school, misbehavior, and poor concentration are other common reactions.

These symptoms may range from mild to severe. More severe symptoms may indicate that you are experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Depression. You need to be aware of how you are coping and try to seek assistance.

What can you do to feel better?

The following list of suggestions may assist you in getting back on track:

1. Try to figure out which events you can control and which are uncontrollable. Try and be positive and focus on good thoughts.
2. If you feel helpless or hopeless: Write or tell your current feelings to others. Share your experience. You are not alone. You need others and others need you. Try and participate in school and community events.
3. If you are losing interest and feeling down: Try to arrange an interesting activity every day; plan for future special events; discuss enjoyable topics, and focus on the future... You do have one.
4. If you lose your appetite or find yourself gaining or losing weight: Don't force yourself to eat; cook your favorite foods, make mealtime a pleasant occasion.
5. If you experience sleep difficulties: Keep regular bed-time hours; do relaxing and calming activities one hour before bed-time such as reading or listening to soft music; end the day with a positive experience.

6. If you feel that you can't concentrate and you feel restless: Change the activities that may increase your restlessness; participate in some activities that make you feel relaxed; increase your physical exercise and recreation activities.
7. If you feel overly scared or fearful: Participate in planned activities with your friends or family. Keep yourself active and busy.
8. If you feel angry or you might want to strike back at yourself or someone else: Know that your feelings are normal. Express your feelings in appropriate ways such as talking to friends, family, and other adults that you trust, working out frustration and anger with physical exercise; or create a living memorial to your friends such as memory books, poems, or other artistic creations. Remember your emotions are normal responses to trauma – dealing with them requires good judgement, self-control, and positive support from others.

If you continue to feel emotions you are concerned about, contact your school's psychologist, school social worker, school counselor or your community mental health center.

NOTE: This handout is adapted from Trauma and Children (Author: Lazarus, P. J.) and Depression in Children (Authors: Saklofske, D., Jenzen, J, Hildebrand, D., and Kaufmann, L.) Handouts for Parents, published by the National Association of School Psychologists, Andrea Center and Servio Carroll, editors, 1998. (301) 657-0270; www.naspweb.org