

# Traumatic Stress Reactions / PTSD Symptoms in Children and Adolescents



## Helping your child recover

Learn what reactions to look for and what you can do to help your child respond in a healthy way

### Each year in the US, child injury statistics show:

- » 1 in 4 children and teens needs medical care for an injury.
- » 7 million injured children are treated in an Emergency Room.
- » Several hundred thousand injured children are admitted to the hospital.

Right now, many thousands of children across the country are recovering from an injury. Like you, their parents and caregivers want to help them the best way possible. It is important to tend to the wounds and rehabilitation, AND it is just as important to remember to understand the possible emotional impact on your child and family.

One of the most important things you can do to help your child is to recognize your child's reactions to injury and understand child trauma symptoms. Many reactions are normal and common; some are more worrisome.

### In the first few days after an injury, it is normal to have certain responses:

- » Nearly all children feel upset, jumpy, or worried at times.
- » Parents and other family members can have similar reactions.
- » Symptoms of stress may include: headache, tense muscles, knots in your stomach, sweaty palms, maybe feeling that life is a bit out of control.
- » Children may be more clingy or have trouble sleeping.
- » Parents and children may argue more.

You can expect these reactions after an injury. With a little time and extra support, most children, and parents, feel better. Some people even notice positive aspects in their reactions to injury.

They may:

- » Feel thankful and relieved that nothing worse happened.
- » Resolve to do things more safely in the future.

### When to worry

When an accident or injury causes overwhelming feelings of fear, helplessness, and horror, it can lead to more than just everyday stress reactions – it can lead to traumatic stress.

While many children and their parents recover from stress symptoms over the first month, about 1 in 6 still have traumatic stress reactions that bother them, even 6 months after an injury, and up to 1 in 10 people develop PTSD at some point in their lives. The intensity and length of the traumatic stress reactions is not related to how bad the physical injury was. It is really important to seek help if symptoms persist for more than a month, because if symptoms are allowed to persist for more than 3 months, it is much more likely to become chronic or long term, possibly life-long.

When traumatic stress reactions last for weeks or months, they can get in the way of getting back to normal and feeling like yourself again. After an injury, post-traumatic stress can also get in the way of physical recovery, contribute to new medical problems, or just make it harder to enjoy life.

### What is post-traumatic stress disorder, or 'PTSD'?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the name given to traumatic stress reactions that:

- » Last for more than one month.
- » Are so severe that they get in the way of normal life. For children and teens, this can affect school, home, and play.
- » Schoolwork and learning might be disrupted because a child cannot concentrate or sleep well.
- » Family relationships and friendships might suffer.
- » Children might stop doing things that they enjoy, or stop trying new things.

There are four main types of traumatic stress reactions:

- » **Re-experiencing:** Reliving what happened
- » **Avoidance:** Staying away from reminders
- » **Hyper-arousal:** Feeling anxious or jumpy
- » Longer term changes in mood or thought

**Re-experiencing** means that your child keeps thinking a lot about the trauma, even when he does not want to. Some re-experiencing is normal and natural. Thinking a lot about what happened, especially at first, is part of how we help ourselves recover from a scary experience. Too much re-experiencing can be very distressing. Your child might have nightmares or “flashbacks” that make her feel like she is going through the trauma all over again, or she may seem far away, “checked out” while she is remembering (called “dissociation”). She may feel really upset or even have physical symptoms when something – a sight, a sound, a smell – reminds her of what happened. She may re-enact the trauma through play, and this is normal and healthy. She is retelling the story, in order to help heal from it.

**Avoidance** symptoms can start by trying not to think or talk about the trauma, or anything connected with it. Sometimes kids want to stay away from people, places or activities because these reminders upset them. And children sometimes develop new fears or worries. Of course, it can be good common sense to be more cautious after an injury. Children may become more aware of safety -- remembering to wear a seat belt, not running into the street after a ball, or staying away from dogs they do not know. But extreme avoidance or fears can become a real problem. Avoidance can interfere with daily life and stop your child from getting back to enjoying things that she usually likes to do.

## Traumatic Stress Reactions / PTSD Symptoms in Children and Adolescents

**Hyper-arousal** also starts with a natural and normal response to danger – the “fight or flight response.” After an injury or accident, this “fight or flight” response might not turn off, even when you are safe.

- » Your heart keeps pounding and you start sweating.
- » Your body is still on the lookout for danger.

After a scary situation like being injured, your child might have the feeling that something bad could happen again at any time, or might jump at any loud noise.

The physical feelings that go along with hyper-arousal can feel scary themselves:

- » Your child might suddenly feel her heart racing or head pounding.
- » She might get worried about what these symptoms mean.

Feeling “on guard” for danger much of the time can lead to:

- » Trouble sleeping.
- » Trouble concentrating, and
- » Being extra cranky or irritable.

The good news is that very good treatments for PTSD are available. Unfortunately, less than half of people with traumatic stress symptoms talk to anyone about their problems or get any professional help, even when their symptoms go on for a long time. If you are not sure whether your child’s worries or fears are realistic, or how to encourage your child to face things that he is avoiding, get some help.

Talk with your family doctor, school counselor, or someone else you trust, or seek a counselor who can help you and your child in managing emotional triggers and with traumatic stress reactions.

### After a traumatic event, what can I do to help decrease or prevent post-traumatic symptoms?

Create **safety**, as much as you can, immediately afterwards and in an ongoing way until the post-traumatic stress symptoms resolve.

**1. Let your child know that they are safe.** In the first days and weeks following an injury many children fear that something bad might happen to them again. Let your child know that they are safe now. Give them extra hugs, even your teens. Younger children may need more cuddle time.

**2. Re-establish old routines for your child, yourself, your family as much as possible, or create new routines, schedules and rhythms.** This includes regular meals and regular sleep schedules.

The key here is creating predictability and certainty after an event that has seriously threatened your child’s safety. While still in the hospital, this may include making a schedule with your care team that can be posted in your child’s hospital room, letting them know what to expect next.

**3. Help your child make changes that really do help keep him safe.** Like wearing a helmet, crossing the street carefully, or telling you where he is going.

**4. Be a “reality check” for your child.** If your child is nervous about doing something, talk together and help her figure out: “Is this really helping me stay safe?” OR “Am I avoiding it just so I will not feel nervous?”

**5. Increase time with family and friends.** Children who get support from family and friends seem to do better in recovering after upsetting events. This may include things like reading together, playing sports or games, or watching movies together.

**6. Take time to deal with your own feelings.** In addition to all the things you do to help your child, it’s important to remember to take good care of yourself. It will be harder to help your child if you are really worried, upset or overwhelmed. Talk about your feelings with other adults, such as family, friends, clergy, your doctor or a counselor.

**7. Keep in mind people in the same family can react in different ways.** Remember, your child’s feelings and worries about the injury might be different from yours. Brothers and sisters can feel upset too. An important way that parents can help is to pay special attention to how your child’s responses might be different from yours. Those are the situations where it can be harder to know how to help.

**8. Help your child understand “trauma reminders” and the natural desire to avoid these.** A trauma reminder can be anything – a place or a person, a sight or a sound, or even a smell. It might be something you hardly notice, till the scared feelings come flooding back. Sometimes kids need help to figure out what makes them feel scared or nervous. When something scary happens, we often learn to treat things connected to it as if they were danger signals. The next time something reminds us of what happened, our body reacts as if we were in danger, even if we are safe. This can make us either “freeze” or want to run away from/avoid whatever is feeling scary in the moment. Another word for “freezing” is dissociation, and it can look like “spacing out.”

### 9. How do we get over new fears or deal with difficult emotions that may come with trauma reminders?

In managing emotions from trauma reminders, it can really help to face reminders over and over, in the course of normal life. We can feel very anxious at first, but each time we experience a trauma reminder and hang in there long enough to know that it does not lead to danger, the scared feelings tend to get weaker. Eventually that “trauma reminder” may not cause any significant emotional response.

Please know that it is natural for your child to want to stay away from things that remind and upset him. But too much avoidance can get in the way of the natural recovery process, and make it harder to get over feeling scared. As a parent, you play an important role in helping your child face new fears without getting stuck in avoidance.

How can parents tell if fears or worries are really a problem? Ask yourself: Does feeling afraid or nervous stop your child from getting back to normal safe activities? Or stop him from enjoying things even if he manages to do them? If so, you can help your child deal with new fears and worries before they become a bigger problem.

**10. Encourage your child.** Help him keep doing those safe things that make him nervous – and praise his courage when he does!

**11. Notice and check your own worries.** Ask yourself: Do my worries stop me from letting my child do things he really should be allowed to do? Use a trusted friend or family member as a “reality check” for yourself – to help you sort through your worries about your child’s safety.