



# Trauma Information Pamphlet For Parents

© 2001, Trauma Psychiatry Program  
University of California, Los Angeles

**Traumatic events** cause terror, intense fear, horror, helplessness, and physical stress reactions (for example, heart beating fast, strong startle, stomach dropping, shakiness). The impact of these events does not simply go away when they are over. Instead, traumatic events are profound experiences that change the way children, adolescents and adults see themselves and their world.

## Common Psychological Effects of Traumatic Experiences

- ◆ Many individuals who have had traumatic experiences suffer from ongoing reactions to them. These reactions are called **Posttraumatic Stress Reactions**. These reactions are common, understandable, and expectable, but are nevertheless serious and can lead to many difficulties in daily life.

There are three types of posttraumatic stress reactions.

***Intrusive reactions*** are ways in which the traumatic experience comes back to mind. These reactions include distressing thoughts or images of the event (for example, picturing what one saw) that can occur while one is either awake or dreaming. Intrusive reactions also include upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience. Some people may act like one of their worst experiences is happening all over again. This is called “a flashback” and can occur in response to a traumatic reminder.

***Avoidance and withdrawal reactions*** are ways people use to keep away from, or protect against, intrusive reactions. They include efforts to avoid talking, thinking and having feelings about the traumatic event and to avoid any reminders of the event, including places and people connected to what happened. Emotions can become restricted, even numb, to protect against distressing emotional reactions to thoughts or

reminders of what happened. Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others may lead to social withdrawal. There may be a loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities.

**Physical arousal reactions** are physical changes that make the body react as if danger is still present. These reactions include constantly being "on the lookout" for danger, startling easily or being jumpy, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty falling or staying asleep, and difficulty concentrating or paying attention.

- ◆ Trauma survivors have also may suffer many types of losses - of loved ones, of home, possessions, and their community. The loss of important things often leads to **Grief Reactions**, which may include: feelings of sadness, anger, guilt or regret over the loss, missing or longing for the deceased, and dreams of seeing the person or possession again. These reactions are normal, vary from person to person, and can last for many years after the loss. Although they may be painful to experience, especially at first, grief reactions are healthy reactions to loss, and reflect the ongoing significance of the loss. Over time, grief reactions tend to include more pleasant thoughts and activities, such as positive reminiscing about the lost person or possession, or finding positive ways to memorialize or remember them.
- ◆ Many people have endured both trauma *and* loss. More specifically, people who have suffered the *sudden* or *traumatic loss* of a loved one often find grieving the loss more difficult. The person may become preoccupied with memories of the disturbing circumstances of the death, such as its tragic and sudden nature, or with issues of human accountability (for example, in regard to building construction practices). This preoccupation can lead to **Complicated Bereavement**. Complicated bereavement is often characterized by intrusion of disturbing images of a traumatic death into *positive remembering* and *reminiscing*. This interferes with important ways of grieving that allow survivors to accept and adjust to the loss of a loved one. Complicated bereavement is also characterized by the avoidance of positive activities or relationships because they remind one of the traumatic loss. Due to its influence in constricting activities, complicated bereavement may interfere with normal life activities and normal child and adult development.
- ◆ An additional major concern for safeguarding the mental health of trauma survivors is the risk for **Depression**. Depression is different from posttraumatic stress, and carries its own risks. Its symptoms include: persistent depressed or irritable mood, loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating, greatly diminished interest or pleasure in life activities, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, feelings of hopelessness, and sometimes thoughts about suicide.
- ◆ In addition to the psychological reactions described above, trauma survivors may experience **Physical Symptoms**, even in the absence of an underlying

physical illness. These symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, rapid heart beating, tightness in the chest, appetite problems, and bowel problems (e.g., constipation and diarrhea). Physical symptoms often accompany posttraumatic, grief, and depressive reactions. More generally, they may signal elevated levels of life stress.

### **Consequences of These Reactions**

Posttraumatic stress, grief, and depressive reactions can be extremely distressing, and may significantly interfere with daily activities. Intrusive memories of past traumatic experiences can interfere in serious ways with learning, school and occupational performance, causing unexplained interruptions in concentration and attention. Avoidance of reminders can lead adolescents to place restrictions on their current activities, relationships, interests, thoughts, and plans for the future. Irritability and reactions to reminders can interfere with getting along with family members and friends. It is particularly difficult when family members have been together during a traumatic experience, because afterwards they can serve as traumatic reminders to each other, leading to unrecognized disturbances in family relationships. Problems with sleeping, concentration and attention can especially interfere with academic or occupational function and performance. People may respond to a sense of emotional numbness or estrangement by using alcohol or drugs. They may engage in reckless behavior and self-endangering actions. Adolescents may rely too much on their adolescent group for deciding about risk-taking behavior and have trouble in turning toward parents for counseling about risks and dangers. They may become inconsistent in their behavior, as they respond to reminders with withdrawal and avoidance or overly aggressive behavior.

Depressive reactions can become quite serious, leading to a major decline in school or occupational performance and learning, social isolation, loss of interest in normal activities, self-medication with alcohol or drugs, acting-out behavior to try to mask their depression, and, most seriously, attempts at suicide. Complicated bereavement can lead to inability to mourn, to reminisce and remember, to fear a similar fate or sudden loss of loved ones, and to difficulties in establishing or maintaining new relationships. Adolescents may respond to traumatic losses by trying to become too self-sufficient and independent from parents and other adults, or by becoming more dependent and taking less initiative.

### **What Makes These Reactions Worse?**

**Posttraumatic Stress Reactions** are often evoked by **trauma reminders**. Many people continue to encounter places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and inner feelings that remind them of past traumatic experiences, even years afterwards. These reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions. Common examples include: sudden loud noises, destroyed buildings, the smell of fire, sirens of ambulances, locations where they experienced the trauma, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the trauma, and television or radio news about the

trauma.

**Grief reactions** are often evoked by **loss reminders**. Those who have lost loved ones continue to encounter situations and circumstances that remind them of the absence of the loved one, even years after the loss. These reminders can bring on feelings of sadness, emptiness in the survivor's life, and missing or longing for the loved one's presence. There are several types of loss reminders: **Empty situations** are ones in which the person is reminded of the absence of the loved one in his/her current life. These include: the empty place at the dinner table, activities that were once shared with the loved one, and special occasions like birthdays and holidays. Adolescents also are reminded by the everyday changes in their lives, especially hardships, as a **consequence of the loss**. Examples include decreases in family income, depression and grief reactions in other family members, disruptions in family functioning, increased family responsibilities, lost opportunities (for example, sports, education, other activities) and the loss of a sense of protection and security.

In addition to the distress evoked by **trauma** and **loss reminders**, **current trauma-related life adversities** constitute a significant source of distress. Efforts devoted to contending with these adversities may significantly deplete a person's coping and emotional resources, and in turn reduce or interfere with the ability to recover from posttraumatic stress, grief and depressive reactions.

### **How Can I Help?**

Parents can be very important in helping children and adolescents to recover from their trauma-related experiences and losses. Because children and adolescents go through many *normal* changes as they mature into young adults, it is not always easy to tell when they are bothered by posttraumatic, grief, or depressive reactions. It is also not always easy to know what type of support they need, or how to offer it. Here are some suggestions about ways to support your children, including open communication, emotional support, and practical support.

- ◆ Try to keep in mind what your children have experienced. Let your child know that you appreciate the seriousness of what they went through, and that you know that their reactions to their traumatic experiences and losses can continue for a long time. At the same time, try to reassure them that things will improve over time.
- ◆ Encourage your children to talk about ways in which they are still bothered by their experiences, losses and current difficulties. This will help you better understand their feelings and behavior.
- ◆ In speaking to your child, try to understand how they are feeling without being critical. For example, don't say things like, "Stop complaining," or "You should be over it by now."

- ◆ It is important to be patient and tolerant, especially when they talk repetitively about the trauma.
- ◆ Let them know how much you would like to be of help whenever they are reminded of their experiences or losses. Get familiar with the many ways your child may be reminded. It is helpful to be open about how you are still affected by reminders. As a family, you can then offer each other emotional support, through physical comfort, understanding and reassurance.
- ◆ Know that your children and adolescents notice and can be bothered by occasions when your mood changes suddenly or you act differently in response to a reminder. Let them know that you are reacting to a reminder and that it is not their fault.
- ◆ If your child feels guilty for the death or injury of others, reassure them that it was not their fault.
- ◆ Understand that anger is part of a child or adolescent's reaction to their post-trauma distress. Try to be tolerant and encourage them to talk about what is bothering them, rather than reprimanding them or telling them to be quiet. However, indicate that abusive language and violence is not allowed.

**Parents' responsiveness to their children's grief is important.**

- ◆ Allow your child to talk about a lost loved one, even though this may be upsetting to you. Don't try to stop them from feeling sad, as this is a normal part of grieving. If you think that their sadness is excessive, then seek psychological counseling.
- ◆ Try to help your children remember good things about a lost friend. Tell them positive things and stories that you remember about the person.
- ◆ When your children ask, don't be afraid to tell them that you are feeling sad when you are thinking about the loss of a loved one. On the other hand, try not to overwhelm your children with the responsibility of feeling like they have to take care of you.
- ◆ Be open and tolerant of your child's protests over the unfairness of the loss and its impact on their lives. This will often resolve over time.

Provided by the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.