

Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress in Children

What is trauma?

Trauma is an event or series of events that involve fear or threat. Traumas include: child abuse, sexual or physical assault, witnessing violence, disasters, serious accidents, violent crime, and the sudden or violent death of a loved one.

What is Posttraumatic Stress (PTS)?

PTS is a reaction to trauma. What causes PTS are feelings of threat, fear, horror, extreme helplessness or shame about the trauma. These reactions can occur if the trauma happened to the person, the trauma was witnessed or if the trauma happened to someone very close.

PTS involves being upset or reacting strongly to remembering or being reminded of the trauma, being hyper alert and on guard, trying to avoid thinking about or being reminded of the trauma and/or numbing or shutting down.

Children are not always able to identify the feelings or reactions. PTS can show up in behaviors such as acting more insecure or anxious, or being irritable and difficult to handle at home or at school.

What causes PTS?

PTS is caused by the memories of the trauma. When the feelings of threat, fear, shame and other strong negative feelings are connected to the memories, every time the trauma is remembered or there is a reminder, the feelings can come back. Avoiding remembering or being reminded happens because the feelings are very distressing.

Is PTS normal?

It is normal to have reactions to a trauma. Most children are at least somewhat upset after a trauma. Some have stronger reactions. There are many reasons why some have stronger reactions than others. Some of the reasons for stronger reactions are:

- Trauma involved serious danger, injury or death
- Trauma was personally experienced
- During the trauma there were strong feelings of fear or shame
- Parents or caregivers being really upset about the trauma
- Past history of trauma
- Past history of psychological problems
- Being female
- Negative reactions from others after the trauma

When is PTS a serious problem?

PTS is usually worst right after the trauma and then gradually gets better. After a few weeks or months, most of the time, PTS is not a big problem. When PTS does not get better over time or if it gets worse, then professional help may be necessary. When PTS does not get better over time it can become Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a psychological condition that involves significant distress about trauma memories including nightmares and flashbacks, high levels of hyper vigilance, concentration problems, irritability, and avoiding reminders of the trauma or numbing. The symptoms interfere with functioning in every day life situations. Trauma-specific treatment is usually necessary to resolve PTSD.

What helps with PTS?

It helps when children and/or their parents/caregivers understand the reactions so they do not seem so strange or abnormal. Giving children extra support and reassurance is important. It also helps to give children ways of calming down when memories are upsetting. Keeping in mind that memories cannot really hurt, they are just memories is one way to think about it. It also helps to encourage children not avoid situations that are reminders and try to get back to normal. Regular routines give children a sense of security. Another important strategy is to make sure that their thoughts about what happened are realistic and helpful; making sure they do not blame themselves or think they are in trouble. Talking to children about what happened and reactions is helpful.

Parents/caregivers can have PTS as well. The same strategies that work for children work for adults as well. It helps children when the adults in their lives are dealing with their own PTS. It is especially important that parents learn not be too upset around their children. It is also important to make sure that children really know they can talk about the trauma and their reactions and that their parents can handle it.

Trauma specialists can give helpful suggestions on how to manage PTS including:

- Helping with sleep problems
- Coping with fears
- Overcoming avoidance
- Putting the experience into perspective

When is professional help needed?

If the PTS symptoms persist without getting better or get worse and they are interfering with functioning at home, school and in the community.

What is the treatment?

There are effective treatments for persistent PTS and PTSD. The counseling treatments are brief (usually 12-20 sessions), structured and trauma-focused. Medication can also be helpful in certain cases. If you decide to seek treatment, make sure to check that the therapist or doctor is familiar with the evidence based treatment approaches so that you get the highest quality care.

Long term impact of trauma

Traumas are often significant life experiences. Time passing or treatment does not change the fact that they happened or that they were very hard experiences to go through. In some cases there are permanent changes in outlook and lifestyle. This is not always bad. The goal of treatment is to lower distress, help put the experience into perspective, and return the child to normal activities and functioning.