

# EMOTIONAL NEEDS THROUGHOUT TRAUMA



**Bright Horizons.**

Early Education & Preschool

**Adults largely set the emotional landscape for children. Children depend on us to be strong and solid, to know what is happening, and to guide them through the shoals of troubled waters.**

When an unexpected tragedy occurs, feelings of vulnerability and insecurity remain for a very long time. The randomness of an event exacerbates these feelings. Despite the world getting statistically safer, it sometimes feels like disaster can strike at any moment.

Knowing how you feel and finding your way to higher ground is critical in order to help the children you love and care for. Even when they are babies, children see, hear, and feel our pain and despair, and they look to us for understanding, reassurance, and hope. They have a sixth sense that detects unease and uncertainty.

**The first step in helping children cope with catastrophe is to sort through our own feelings and get the support that we need.** This cannot be overstated. Children need all the love, strength, and reassurance that we can muster. Their sense of safety stems from us, the big, strong adults who protect them from misfortunes that they never imagined.

## **COMMON EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO TRAUMA**

After a loss or trauma, people typically experience emotional shock and grief, and need time to reconstruct their lives. Below are some common responses to trauma:

- ▶ **Shock:** How could this happen?
- ▶ **Confusion:** What does it all mean?
- ▶ **Fear or worry:** What will happen next; where, when, and to whom else will this happen? Will it end?
- ▶ **Grief:** For someone I loved, or someone else like me, or the person I was, or the life I led before.
- ▶ **Anger:** At the people behind the tragedy, the people not helping, and the cruelty and unfairness of it all.
- ▶ **Guilt:** Why them and not me? Could I have done more?
- ▶ **Shame and surprise:** It's not like me to behave this way: angry, bitter, blaming, or scared.
- ▶ **Helplessness:** How can I ever make my world OK again?
- ▶ **Sadness:** Lives lost or adrift, children orphaned, futures turned to mud.
- ▶ **Isolation or alienation:** I'm probably the only person who feels exactly this way, and I am not sure if anyone understands my feelings.
- ▶ **Hopelessness and despair:** I'm not sure my efforts are worth it. What does it matter?

## COMMON CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR

Many people respond to trauma with some of the following reactions and changes in behavior:

- ▶ Appetite changes
- ▶ Change in sleeping patterns
- ▶ Anxiety and tension
- ▶ Headaches and low resistance to illness
- ▶ Crying or depression
- ▶ Anger or short temper
- ▶ Fatigue, apathy, numbness, or listlessness
- ▶ Hyperactivity or mood swings
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Numbness or apathy
- ▶ Replaying events over and over

All these reactions are normal, but when the reaction is intense or prolonged, seeking help is important.

## EMOTIONAL SHOCK

Direct survivors of catastrophic events often go into the same emotional shock that follows the sudden death of a spouse, parent, or child. They become seriously dazed and confused and exhibit many if not most of the symptoms of trauma for days, weeks, or even longer if the circumstances continue.

To get through this period, survivors need:

- ▶ Calm, uncluttered surroundings that convey order and safety
- ▶ To return to routine instead of generating more change
- ▶ Practical, functional help, e.g., finding keys, paying bills, making meals, getting groceries, or handling insurance and bank accounts
- ▶ Help mentally digesting new information — what they need to do, where they need to be
- ▶ The stability and reassurance of the familiar faces of friends, neighbors, store clerks, and librarians
- ▶ To avoid replays of their disaster, or any other disturbing events, as they can reawaken impressions of the all too recent catastrophe and rekindle their emotional distress

(Adapted from “Emotional Recovery After Natural Disasters: How to Get Back to a Normal Life” by Ilana Singer)

## **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)**

It is important to avoid diagnosing yourself or others and to avoid the tendency to interpret temporary trauma as PTSD, but it is useful to be mindful of the condition and the symptoms. If you have any concerns, consult a professional. Of course, if you have urgent concerns about a person’s safety, contact 911.

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), “PTSD is a mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it.” However, not everyone who goes through these types of events develops PTSD.

Importantly, there is no shame in being deeply impacted by trauma. From service members to refugees to domestic abuse survivors, being profoundly impacted by trauma is a circumstance shared by many. Getting professional help right away is an important part of recovery.

PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. Symptoms can vary over time and from person to person.

### **INTRUSIVE MEMORIES**

Symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- ▶ Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- ▶ Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- ▶ Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- ▶ Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

### **AVOIDANCE**

Symptoms of avoidance may include:

- ▶ Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- ▶ Avoiding places, activities, or people that remind you of the traumatic event

## NEGATIVE CHANGES IN THINKING AND MOOD

Symptoms of negative changes in thinking and mood may include:

- ▶ Negative thoughts about yourself, other people, or the world
- ▶ Hopelessness about the future
- ▶ Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- ▶ Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- ▶ Feeling detached from family and friends
- ▶ Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- ▶ Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- ▶ Feeling emotionally numb

## CHANGES IN PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Symptoms of changes in physical and emotional reactions (also called arousal symptoms) may include:

- ▶ Being easily startled or frightened
- ▶ Always being on guard for danger
- ▶ Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- ▶ Trouble sleeping
- ▶ Trouble concentrating
- ▶ Irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior
- ▶ Overwhelming guilt or shame

**Source:** <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>