

TYPES OF TRAUMA



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Early Education & Preschool

Children’s lives have always been marked by change. Each day brings new revelations that life is filled with storms as well as sunshine. No child ultimately escapes the experiences of fear, loss, grief, or trauma. But some events — those that shatter their sense of security — put particular pressure on the adults in their lives to be at their best as parents and caregivers. — *Toward a Better World* (2020)

We cannot protect children from every potentially traumatizing event, but we can offer comfort and security as we rebuild and restore communities and individual lives after a difficult experience. Below are some common types of trauma children (and adults) experience. Simply having some way to define, organize, and give context to traumas can give us a place from which to begin to heal.

SOCIETY-SHAKING EVENTS

Society-shaking traumas are those that affect an entire community, city, nation, or even world. These incidents cause a collective trauma and often affect multiple aspects of society, including the economy and basic infrastructure. They usually require comprehensive and prolonged support.

Society-shaking events include:

Terrorism and violence

- ▶ May include bombings, public shootings, or other violent incidents.
- ▶ Cause widespread anxiety and the feeling that we are no longer safe.

Natural disasters

- ▶ May include wildfires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, etc.
- ▶ Will likely increase with climate change.
- ▶ Can affect large groups of people, leading to injury or illness, homelessness, job loss, or mass migration.

Political and Social Unrest

- ▶ May include war, political and racial conflict, and genocide.
- ▶ May cause mass immigration and refugee crises, homelessness, job loss, loss of infrastructure, or political instability.

SECONDARY TRAUMA

- ▶ Secondary trauma is trauma felt by people who are not directly involved in a crisis.
- ▶ Secondary trauma can be exacerbated by 24-hour news coverage.
- ▶ Children watching news coverage have difficulty putting it in perspective. They may think, “That could have been me or my friend or relative or someone I love,” or, “Why them and not us?”
- ▶ Children who have experienced a disaster or trauma in their past may experience stress responses when hearing about new, similar events.
- ▶ Children and adults who are highly sensitive or empathetic may be particularly sensitive to secondary trauma.

INDIVIDUAL LIFE CHALLENGES

Headline-making events like the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricane Maria, 9/11, and school shootings touch almost all of us. But remember that every day, even without large-scale disasters, untold numbers of children look around and ask, “What happened to my world?”

Children and their families may experience the consequences of:

- ▶ Death, injury, or serious illness of a loved one
- ▶ Job loss or reduction
- ▶ Financial instability
- ▶ Divorce or marital conflict
- ▶ Homelessness
- ▶ Addictions, violence, or abuse

All these daily tragedies send thousands of families into a sudden descent of confusion, fear, anger, or grief. The child whose predictable personal world is collapsing will live with the same fear and uncertainty as the child in a national crisis. There are, of course, differences when a calamity or crisis is personal rather than communal.

The sense of isolation and powerlessness may be greater — how can the world go on as if nothing happened? On the other hand, a personal tragedy in a caring community might engender more support because the rest of the community is not in crisis. No individual crises are exactly the same; each of us is different, and the circumstances are unique.

But the shock, disbelief, grieving, numbness, anger, mood swings, and inability to go about daily life — the need to talk or the need to be silent — are the same. And our

needs for security and hope for the future are the same as well.

A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

It's important to remember that responses to trauma vary widely depending on the individual circumstances.

Consider the following:

- ▶ Degree of loss and trauma
- ▶ Vulnerability caused by poverty and lack of resources
- ▶ Toxic stress and PTSD
- ▶ Differences in temperament and perspective

DEGREE OF LOSS AND TRAUMA

Every survivor has a story that deserves to be heard. Many, perhaps most, were brave and terrified at the same time. But the range of trauma is extraordinarily wide. When disaster strikes, many lives are disrupted and lots of people are affected — some firsthand, others from a distance.

Lumping survivors together diminishes the horror that people experienced and continue to face. Some may lose their sense of safety and perhaps their optimism. However, neither of these is a small loss. Some survivors have lost loved ones or are permanently injured. Some (including young children) are separated from their families for weeks after a disaster with no way of knowing their fate. Some people lose precious items or key documents/proof of identity: birth certificates, IDs, photographs, financial papers, insurance documents, and school records. Others can spend days without food or water, or witness death and violence while fearing for their own lives.

VULNERABILITY CAUSED BY POVERTY AND A LACK OF RESOURCES

When disaster strikes, low-income people tend to fare worse in nearly all cases. In a natural disaster, without any financial cushion, their shelter is more precarious, their “rainy day” resources nonexistent, and their ability to evacuate the scene hampered by no place to go and no way to get there. Health insurance coverage may be sparse and deductibles may be beyond their means.

For low-income people, getting the care they need to heal from physical and emotional wounds can be challenging. Furthermore, families living in financial hardship may also experience other life stressors such as food insecurity or frequent moves due to affordable housing challenges. Some adults can shelter their children from these hardships, but most often children experience some level of stress in these circumstances, whether it is directly or indirectly via the adults' stress levels.

TOXIC STRESS AND PTSD

Toxic stress, a prolonged level of stress that can have far-reaching consequences, may occur when a person suffers from ongoing issues like abuse, homelessness, food insecurity, mental health issues, or a threat of or actual violence. This persistent stress is disruptive to physical and emotional development and can impact overall health.

We all feel and behave differently in response to trauma. The timing and intensity of our feelings and the behavioral changes that follow vary from person to person. Some take it all in a great rush that results in an open wound of emotion, others compartmentalize or push down feelings and try to manage or hide the response. The stress in each of our lives varies widely, as do the supports that we have to offset the large and small challenges to our well-being.

But somewhere inside, we all may feel frightened or vulnerable at times. A disaster or other crisis in which a loved one dies or homes are lost is a different category of trauma altogether. The disaster is not simply a traumatic event; it becomes an ongoing, debilitating, and traumatic existence. With time, care, healing, and sometimes treatment, the impact of the trauma typically subsides, but some people develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The development of PTSD is not predictable.

DIFFERENCES IN TEMPERAMENT AND PERSPECTIVE

Children's reactions to societal or individual trauma can vary widely. For some children, the impact is less emotional and traumatic and more intellectual, practical, political, or spiritual. These children may be full of questions: "Why did this happen? How did this happen? What do we do now?"

This can be challenging for adults who may be suffering emotionally, especially if the child's response seems unemotional or lacking in sensitivity. It is important to empathize with the child's point of view and recognize that curiosity may feel inappropriate to us as adults but is perfectly normal for a child.

Disasters bring a welcome array of mental health professionals with useful advice on coping with trauma. However, it is important for professionals and parents alike not to become so focused on trauma that they see it when it isn't there and inadvertently inducing anxiety when they find children's reactions that are relatively measured and mild. There will be a variety of reactions to a disaster, and many adults and children not significantly affected by an event may feel little more than the desire to continue to live their lives.