

Understanding and Supporting Your Child Through Emotional Trauma



Highlights

Emotional trauma can be caused by one-off events, things that happen many times, or the accumulation of many things.

If your child has emotional trauma or is grieving, you may notice a change in their feelings and behaviors.

Emotional trauma can have lasting effects on your child's health and well-being.

There are ways you can help your child recover from emotional trauma - the earlier you notice and get support, the better.

Realizing your child is struggling emotionally is difficult, so it is important to look after yourself and get support.

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Understanding Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma is the lasting mental effect of a difficult event or events. It's also called psychological trauma.

Emotional trauma can be described as emotional or psychological:

- harm
- damage
- injury

Trauma can affect babies, toddlers, and children of any age. If your child has emotional trauma, they will need your support.

Common Causes of Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma can be caused by traumatic events such as:

- Moving house or changing school
- A natural disaster like a bushfire
- An accident like a car crash
- Experiences of grief and loss
- Becoming ill or disabled
- War or conflict

Emotional trauma and distress can also be caused by ongoing stressful situations such as abuse, bullying, or a chronic illness.

Grief and loss

Grief is a normal reaction to events. Children can experience grief and loss in response to many different things, including:

- The death of a pet, family member, friend, or someone else they knew
- Family break-up

Losing a friend

Grief can lead to emotional trauma if the event was traumatic and overwhelming for your child.

Recognizing the Effects of Emotional Trauma

The effects of emotional trauma can range from mild to severe. Sometimes, your child will be able to cope with and recover from emotional trauma with little lasting effect. For example, stress might upset your child for a few days and pass relatively quickly.

Other times, emotional trauma can be more severe. It may be very difficult for your child to move past a traumatic event, causing distress and other health problems.

Distress can have deeper, lasting effects on your child's life and development. This might include:

- Mental health
- Physical health
- Relationships
- Social and communication skills

Traumatic events can change the way your child acts and the things they say. Severe trauma can also impact how they react to situations as they get older.

It's important to remember that people experience trauma differently. What might seem easy for one child to cope with might be very difficult for another.

Signs Your Child May Be Struggling

All children express their emotions differently. There are signs to look out for if you think your child is traumatized or distressed.

Your child may feel strong emotions like:

- Sadness

Anger
Shock
Anxiety

If your child has gone through a traumatic event, they may seem confused and may not understand what has happened. Other children may not appear affected at all by the same traumatic event. All these feelings are normal.

Your child might show signs of emotional trauma through changes in their personality and behavior. You might notice that they:

- Struggle to concentrate
- Struggle at school
- Shut down, or become quiet and withdrawn
- Have behavior problems
- Have tantrums and are hyperactive
- Get frightened easily or cry for no clear reason
- Are clingy and less confident

They may also experience physical effects like:

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Difficulty falling asleep
- Loss of appetite
- Nightmares
- Sleep disorders

Your child might also start to behave in ways that are young for their age, such as:

- Sucking their thumb
- Wetting the bed
- Becoming afraid of the dark

Your child may also re-enact the trauma they have gone through when playing and talking. They may do this to try and understand what has happened.

It's important to remember that your child may cope well on some days and struggle on others.

If you are concerned about your child, it's best to check with a professional. You can speak to your doctor or a health professional.

Supporting Your Child Through Trauma

Trauma can continue to affect your child for years. However, you can support them to manage their emotions and recover.

There are different levels of trauma, and each child's experience may be different. How your child recovers from their emotional trauma can be influenced by:

Their age and developmental skills

Their personality

Events in their earlier life

The nature of the traumatic event that has impacted them

Whether a traumatic experience was expected

How much support they receive from family and friends

You know and understand your child better than anyone. You can make a real difference to their health and well-being and help them recover. The earlier you act on signs of emotional trauma, the better.

There are different ways you can help your child work through emotional trauma.

Help your child understand

After experiencing trauma, your child may not be able to describe their feelings. They may not fully understand what has happened.

If they don't understand what has happened, they may think it's somehow their fault. It's important to explain what's happened in words they can understand.

Encourage your child to talk to you about how they're feeling if they can. Reassure them that:

Big, difficult feelings are normal
It's OK to be emotional
You believe what they are feeling
Their trauma is not their fault

If they can't talk about it, you can help them express their feelings in other ways, such as drawing or play.

If you're also working through trauma, show them that it's OK to be sad. However, be considerate. Try not to overwhelm your child with your own emotions.

You might feel like denying that there's something traumatic going on to protect your child. However, if you keep the truth from them, they may imagine worse scenarios. It's always better to share the truth in a way that is appropriate for your child.

Make your child feel safe and loved

There are lots of ways you can help your child feel safe.

It's important that your child knows that they can rely on you. Reassure them that you love them and will care for them no matter what.

To comfort them, you can:

Offer them cuddles and kisses
Sing to them
Read with them

Be patient with your child's emotions and behaviors while they are healing.

Try to keep up regular, familiar routines. At the same time, be flexible to your child's needs and emotions. These things can strengthen your family bonds and help your child feel secure.

Avoid long periods of time away from your child if you can. If you are separated, you can keep in touch by:

Text
Video chat
Phone
Email

Building a support network

It's important to maintain strong, supportive relationships in your child's life, with people other than yourself. Let the people in your child's life know what is going on.

This can include telling:

Teachers and carers
Other family members
Friends and friends' parents

Strong relationships will help your child feel safe and help their recovery, even when you're not around.

It can also help your child to see how others react to situations and understand that they are not alone.

Look into support services available at your child's school.

Supporting Your Child Through Grief and Loss

Ways to help your child manage grief will depend on their age.

Young children may not understand death. They may ask if they can visit the person who has died, or they may ask when they are coming back. They may repeat these questions while they are trying to understand.

Be patient with your young child. Gently explain to them what has happened and that they won't be able to see the person again. Reassure them that they are very loved and that what has happened is not their fault.

Preschool-age children tend to take things literally. For example, if you tell them "Grandma has gone to a better place," they may want to go and visit. Instead, try to explain things to them as simply and truthfully as possible. You can try saying "Grandma has died."

As your child gets older, they will begin to understand that death is permanent. They may fear that:

Things will get worse

They will lose someone else (typically their parent or sibling)

Reassure them that what they are feeling is normal, and that things will get better. They may be curious to better understand what has happened and ask questions about death. You can help by answering their questions in a way that suits their age and understanding.

When to Seek Medical Help

If your child has emotional trauma, they might need more support. It's a good idea to seek professional help if:

Your child's distress lasts more than a couple of weeks

Your child's trauma seems worse after a couple of weeks

You observe new concerns in your child

You are having difficulty managing your child's trauma

Your child's family or home environment is stressful

If you are concerned about your child, take them to your doctor. They can assess their mental health, behavior, and development and monitor their progress.

You can also talk to your doctor about seeing a mental health professional such as a:

Psychologist

Counselor

Other specialist support service

Caring for Yourself While Helping Your Child

It can be very hard to look after a child who is dealing with trauma. Your child may need more from you physically and emotionally at this time. This can be difficult and tiring, especially if you are also working through your own grief or trauma.

Taking care of your own physical and mental well-being is very important. If you are struggling, it can impact your child and your ability to support them. Try to look after yourself so you can provide the best care for your child.

Try to find time to take care of yourself. Be sure to:

Sleep well

Eat properly

Exercise

Take time to relax, such as by listening to music

You can also try relaxation or breathing exercises if you are feeling overwhelmed.

If you are finding things difficult, you can get support from:

Your family

Your friends

Your doctor or another health professional

Tools and Assistance

If you or your child are dealing with emotional trauma or grief, it's important to know that you're not alone. There are many resources and services available to support you:

Family doctor or pediatrician - a great starting point if you notice any changes in your child's behavior. Your doctor can refer you to a child psychologist or another specialist.

School psychologist or counselor - if the challenges are showing up at school, you can reach out to a school counselor for support.

Mental health professionals - psychologists, counselors, or therapists who specialize in trauma and grief can provide therapy tailored to your child's needs.

Support groups - both in-person and online groups can offer emotional support and a space to share experiences with others who understand.

Parenting resources - programs like Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) can help you navigate difficult parenting challenges during this time.

Crisis helplines - various helplines provide immediate support for both children and parents dealing with trauma or grief.