

Trauma and families

Family members who experience a shared distressing event often become closer and appreciate each other more. Such events include car accidents, bushfires, floods, sudden illness, a sudden death in the family, crime or violence. These experiences can change a person's attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviour.

Each family member will react to the event in their own way. If family members don't understand each other's experience then misunderstandings, communication breakdowns and other problems can result. Understanding common distress reactions and their effect on family life can help everyone cope better.

Remember that many families look back and see that crises have helped them be closer and stronger. Don't hesitate to seek professional help if you are uncertain or think your family is struggling to recover.

Disruption to family relationships

These experiences can temporarily disrupt the way families normally work. Common reactions include:

- Parents feel unsure how to help their children after the crisis.
- Communication breaks down as each family member struggles in their own way to come to terms with what has happened.
- Children don't want to go to school.
- Parents don't want to go to work.
- Household schedules tend to lapse – for example, chores are missed, regular mealtimes are disrupted or recreation is neglected.
- The usual arrangements for household responsibilities change. Children may cook meals for a time, parents may feel unable to do tasks or children may not want to be alone.

People react differently

It is important to remember that it is normal for people to respond in different ways to distressing events. However, sometimes people's responses can clash. One person may withdraw and need time to themselves, while the other needs company and wants to talk about it.

Common reactions may include:

- **Strong feelings** – anxiety, fear, sadness, guilt, anger, vulnerability, helplessness or hopelessness. These feelings will not just apply to the event, but to many other previously normal areas of life as well.
- **Physical symptoms** – headache, nausea, stomach ache, insomnia, broken sleep, bad dreams, changed appetite, sweating and trembling, aches and pains, or a worsening of pre-existing medical conditions.
- **Thinking is affected** – difficulties with concentrating or thinking clearly, short-term memory problems, difficulty planning or making decisions, inability to absorb information, recurring thoughts of the traumatic event, thinking about other past tragedies, pessimistic thoughts or an inability to make decisions.
- **Behaviour changes** – a drop in work or school performance, turning to changed eating patterns, using drugs or alcohol, being unable to rest or keep still, lack of motivation to do anything, increased aggressiveness or engaging in self-destructive or self-harming activities.

Family life – immediately following the event

Every family is different but, generally speaking, common changes to family life soon after the event include:

- Parents may fear for each other's safety and the safety of their children away from home.
- Family members may experience nightmares or upsetting dreams about the event.
- Fear of another distressing experience happening may affect family life.
- Anger at whoever is believed to have caused the event can often flow on to the affected loved one or the family in general.
- Family members may feel overwhelmed by insecurity or lack of control or at the thought of having so much to do.
- Family members may not know how to talk to each other. Each person is struggling to understand what has happened and how they feel about it. If talking makes people upset, they will often avoid it.
- Impatience, misunderstandings, arguments over small things and withdrawal from each other can all impact on family life and relationships.

Family life – weeks or months later

Family relationships may change weeks or even months after the event. Because time has passed, family members sometimes don't realise how changes are directly linked to the event.

Every family is different but, generally speaking, common changes in the weeks or months after the event include:

- Family members may become short-tempered or irritable with each other, which can lead to arguments and friction.
- They may lose interest in activities or perform less well at work or school.
- Children may be clingy, grizzly, demanding or naughty.
- Teenagers may become argumentative, demanding or rebellious.
- Individuals may feel neglected and misunderstood.
- Some family members may work so hard to help loved ones, they neglect to look after themselves.
- Individual family members may feel less attached or involved with one another.
- Parents may experience emotional or sexual problems in their relationship.
- Everyone feels exhausted and wants support, but cannot give much in return.

Family life – years later

Sometimes the response to a distressing or frightening event may take a long time to show. In some cases, it may take years for problems to surface. This can happen if the person is very busy helping others or dealing with related issues such as insurance, rebuilding, relocation, legal processes or financial problems. When things have returned to normal, their reactions may show up.

Every family is different but, generally speaking, changes to family dynamics can include:

- The experience may be relived when faced with a new crisis.
- Problems may seem worse than they are and be more difficult to handle.
- Changes to family life that occurred in the days, weeks or months after the event may become permanent habits.
- Family members may cope differently with reminders of the event. Some may want to commemorate the anniversary or revisit the scene of the event, while others may want to forget about it.
- Conflict in coping styles can lead to arguments and misunderstandings if the family members aren't sensitive to each other's needs.

Helpful strategies

There are things you can do to reduce complications and support family recovery.

- Remember that recovery takes time. Prepare the family to go through a period of stress and cut back on unnecessary demands to conserve everyone's energy.
- Don't just focus on the problems. Make free time to be together and relax or else the stress will not subside.
- Keep communicating. Make sure each family member lets the others know what is going on for them and how to help them.
- Plan regular time out and maintain activities you enjoyed before – even if you don't much feel like it. You probably will enjoy yourself if you make the effort. Enjoyment and relaxation rebuild emotional energy.
- Keep track of your family's progress in recovery and what has been achieved. Don't just keep thinking about what is still to be done.
- Stay positive and encouraging, even if at times everyone needs to talk about their fears and worries. Remind yourself that families get through the hard times and are often stronger.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497

Things to remember

- When a family is affected by a crisis, everyone in the family will react in a different way.
- Understanding distress reactions and their effect on family dynamics can help the family to cope.
- Don't hesitate to seek professional help if you think your family is struggling to recover.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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