

Trauma and families - tips for parents

The way your family copes straight after a distressing event shapes how you cope later. As soon as possible, try to talk about what happened, what everyone experienced and make sure it is all clear. It is usually best to be open and share what you know with all family members, even young children. They know more than you think and may misunderstand things that are not explained to them.

Don't be frightened of emotions. Keep distressed family members company in their bad feelings; these will gradually pass and isolation only makes things worse. It will be hard at first, but remember that time and support will help adults and children recover.

There are many things you can do to help your family to recover. If you are concerned that the family as a whole or some family members are struggling, please seek professional help.

Factors that influence recovery

Some families come to terms with distressing events relatively quickly and move on, while still having sad memories. Other families take longer. Everyone needs the time they need. There are no short cuts.

Recovery is affected by:

- How the family members get on in good times
- Any other problems family members are coping with
- Previous distressing events and how they have been managed
- The type of event that has happened to the family
- How each family member has experienced the event
- The kinds of support available to the family at the time
- The personality of each family member.

Keep talking

It is important to keep sharing your thoughts and feelings. Without communication, family members feel isolated and misunderstandings may develop. Suggestions include:

- **Inform your children** – even very young children realise something is wrong. Use language they can understand. Let them ask questions and answer them honestly. Give the basic facts but avoid unnecessary detail.
- **Make regular time to talk about the event** – don't wait for topics to come up in conversation; they may not. Encourage everyone to talk together or in pairs.
- **Remember that everyone has different needs** – ask each person to say what they need from the others. One person might want time alone; another may want company or professional support.
- **Talk about some good things** – discuss things that were part of what happened and how it turned out in the end. Talk about what has survived the crisis as well as what was lost.
- **Keep coming back to recovery** – keep focused on the thought that you will help each other through it, even if it takes time. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that most people do recover from even great tragedies in time.

If family members don't want to talk freely about what happened, talk about what to do to get over it and what they might need now. Protect your relationships and preserve trust and honesty. Listen to each other and show interest.

Respect each other's reactions

Each family member has their own way of dealing with stress.

- Individuals have different recovery times. One person may recover relatively quickly, while another may take longer. There is no right or wrong way.
- Some family members want to talk at length; others may keep their thoughts to themselves. Forcing them to do what you think is right usually does not help. Encourage and support other members of your family without pressure.
- Don't assume that young children can't feel strong emotions. It is important to take their feelings and thoughts seriously. They may not know how to explain what they feel.
- Each person may have different ideas on how recovery should be handled. For example, one person may want to keep a deceased loved one's belongings; another may want to donate them to charity. Discuss issues as a family and try to agree, even if it takes time.

Take care of extra stresses

If left unattended, little stresses can add up to major problems.

- Find out as much as you can about what to expect and how to cope with distress and trauma. Share the information with your family. It is reassuring to know that strong feelings and confused thoughts are normal and don't mean you are 'going crazy'.
- Keep track of how family members are managing and recovering. Attend to problems as they arise.
- Don't burden children with too much responsibility. Household routine will be disrupted and sometimes children take on adult tasks for a time, such as cooking. Don't let these changes become permanent – children need to get on with their recovery.
- Children may not cope with normal stresses such as going to school or things they were doing before. Allow them time to recover then help them gradually pick up responsibilities as they feel better.
- Avoid becoming overprotective towards children. If you give the impression the world is a dangerous place, they will believe you and stay fearful.
- Put aside commitments and responsibilities that were made before the event if you need to. Give yourself permission to change your plans so you can concentrate attention on what you and your family need for recovery.

General suggestions

Suggestions include:

- It is helpful and reassuring, particularly for children, to get back to your normal routine as soon as you can.
- Make sure everyone gets enough sleep and eats well.
- Have plenty of exercise – it burns off stress chemicals and encourages better sleep.
- Make sure there are opportunities for play, leisure and fun – especially for children.
- Encourage family members to relax. Warm baths, massage, exercise and cuddling all reduce muscle tension.
- Use every resource available to you. Contact support organisations, ask relatives or friends for help and tell employers what is happening.
- Accept help from relatives, neighbours or colleagues, but tell them what you need. This may include shopping, cleaning the house or making home-cooked meals.
- Seek professional help if family relationships have changed or members are struggling to cope. A good place to start is your doctor. If you do this sooner rather than later, it can prevent problems.

Professional help

Some family disruption after a distressing event is normal. If it continues or gets in the way of recovery, it may help to get professional advice about how to move on. See your doctor for further information.

Signs your family may need help include:

- The family's usual coping strategies aren't working.
- The family doesn't seem to be getting back to normal.
- Work, school or home life is suffering.
- Family conflicts aren't getting better or are getting worse.
- A family member is continuing to be depressed or anxious.
- A family member has turned aggressive or violent.
- Destructive coping strategies are used, such as drugs and alcohol.
- You are worried about your family or a particular family member.

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

- The way your family first copes with a trauma sets up how you cope later on.
- Encourage open communication and the sharing of information among everyone, even young children.
- Seek professional help early if the family behaviour has got worse or if individuals are struggling to cope.

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

Department of Health and Department of Human Services - Emergency Management

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