



# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

**A guide for parents or carers of young children**



EMDR is recognised by the World Health Organisation (2013) as an effective therapy for children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic events. It also has the highest recommendation for Children and Adolescents with PTSD from the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies 2018.

It is very common for children and adolescents to feel distressed following adverse childhood experiences (trauma). In most cases symptoms improve within a few weeks. Unfortunately, a small percentage will go on to develop symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as other symptoms such as anxiety or hopelessness.

PTSD is caused by an inability to process the adverse or traumatic event naturally, often when the traumatic event feels especially overwhelming, shocking or distressing. An indication that your child or teenager may be struggling with symptoms of trauma following a traumatic event may include; intrusions (episodes of 'remembering' the original event), flashbacks (where the child or adolescent may behave as if they are re-experiencing the original event) or avoidances of reminders of the event. Behaviourial or emotional changes maybe the first things you notice in your child, indicating that they may need support. For some young people, therapy may be beneficial.

# What is psychological trauma?

**A psychological trauma can occur when your child experiences either a single event or long lasting or repeated events that are so overwhelming it affects their ability to cope or make sense of what happened.**

Examples of traumatic events include:

- Serious accidents i.e. road traffic collision
- Grief, loss or parental absence
- Medical events or being told they have a life threatening illness
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Natural or man-made disasters
- Being taken hostage
- Terrorist attacks
- Bullying

Everyone has different ways of responding to events. What one child finds traumatic another child may not find distressing.

It is very common for children to feel some degree of distress after a trauma. Most of the time this distress will improve over the days and weeks after the event. However, in some cases the distress can be longer lasting and continue for months or even years. Receiving the appropriate type of support can help your child come to terms with what has happened so that it does not continue to effect them for the rest of their life.



# How your child may react

**Children will react in a variety of different ways after a trauma.  
They may communicate their distress through their behaviours.**



## Typical behavioural reactions that your child may show include:

- Bedwetting
- Stomach aches, headaches or unexplained physical pains
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares or night terrors
- Tantrums
- Being clingy and not wanting to separate from you
- Needing their comforters, dummies or cuddly toys more frequently
- Regression (going backwards) in developmental milestones including speech and toileting
- Dizzy or disorientated or appearing spaced out
- Avoid going to certain places that remind them of what happened
- Denying that something happened
- Difficulty concentrating
- Being very alert and sensitive to everything going on around them





# How your child may feel

Young children often do not have the words or understanding to tell you what they are feeling. It is important to remember that despite this, they will be experiencing a range of different feelings.

## Some typical feelings they may have include:

- **Anger** – that something terrible has happened to them or others. They may be angry towards the people involved or angry at themselves that they didn't do something to change the situation.
- **Guilt** – that they believed they should have done something to prevent the trauma happening or they may feel they were responsible or to blame. They may feel guilty that they survived when others didn't.
- **Frightened** – that the trauma could happen again or that they are not safe anywhere or with anyone. They may feel too scared to tell anyone about what happened.
- **Sad** – about the trauma or if someone died or was injured.
- **Ashamed or embarrassed** – by what happened and are worried about telling anyone in case they get told off.

# What can you do to help your child

Your child will need to feel safe with you and believe that you and other significant people in their lives can cope and manage whatever they are feeling and behaving. Your child may push boundaries but try to stay calm. They will want to know they are loved by you regardless of whatever has happened to them.

Let your child know that it is normal to have lots of different feelings and emotions after a trauma.

It's important your child feels you have heard them, thank them for telling you and help them accept whatever emotions they are feeling, empathise with them and acknowledge that the trauma they have experienced has been really tough. Let them know you think they are very brave and courageous.

Try to offer a range of activities which can help them have your child take a 'mental tea break' from their worries. Keeping the daily routine going and enabling social connections with family and friends, as best as possible, will also provide a sense of familiarity and stability.

## Activities that can help take your child's mind of what may be worrying them. Ideas include:

- Playing games
- Singing songs or listening to music
- Cooking
- Drawing and painting
- Playing with friends
- Mindfulness activities
- Swimming, ball games or other sporting activities
- Creative activities

# How to get help

Many children will recover from traumatic experiences without any additional professional support, especially when symptoms are mild. However, some children will go on to develop more chronic symptoms that can last for a longer period of time. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the name given to describe these symptoms.

Psychological support can be very effective in helping people with PTSD. There are different types of therapies available on the NHS including Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (tf-CBT).

It is important that you visit your GP as soon after your child's trauma as possible. They can help to identify whether any further help is required and signpost your child to the most appropriate early support or more specialist psychological services if symptoms continue. Sometimes in order to best help your child, seeking support for your own experience of trauma can be the most significant first step.





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