

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Trauma in Children and Adolescents Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

Trauma is caused by a sudden and unforeseen event that causes extreme fear and possible harm to a child. It is also referred to as emotional harm and it is a relatively normal reaction that occurs in response to an extreme event. A student's age, level of development, and availability of support will factor into how well he/she deals with the trauma.

- These events can include but are not limited to:
 - Violence (e.g. school shootings, witness/victim of abuse)
 - War
 - Terrorism
 - Natural disaster (e.g., fire, hurricane, earthquake, flood)
 - Accidents
 - Medical procedures
 - Serious threats (e.g. bomb threats)
- With psychiatric trauma, emotional and distressful memories are stored in the brain and can lead to other emotional and social problems. Trauma does not typically appear during the traumatic event, but rather once it is over. The trauma can appear within days, weeks, months or years.

Why do we care?

- As many as 67% of trauma survivors experience lasting psychosocial impairment.
- Trauma can affect a child's brain and delay certain abilities which can make it harder for the child to concentrate and study. A traumatic event can also hinder a child's emotional maturity, causing a child to close the world out, not allowing emotional growth. The child may also experience many negative emotions in which he/she may feel extreme betrayal and lack of faith in his/her life and the world.
- Trauma can have serious effects on a student's well-being physically, emotionally and academically.
- Some children will experience difficulty coping with the traumatic events and may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Child Traumatic Stress (CTS), depression or overwhelming, prolonged grief.
 - PTSD is an anxiety disorder that occurs following exposure to an extreme stressor (i.e., when a person sees or is a part of a highly traumatic event). The event will usually be a life-threatening or extremely distressing situation that causes a person to feel intense fear, horror or a sense of helplessness. The risk of developing PTSD is related to the seriousness of the event, the child's proximity to the event, whether or not the event was repeated, and the child's relationship to those affected.
 - CTS is a psychological response that some children have as a result of a traumatic event. These responses remain once the event has passed and negatively affects the daily life of the child.
 - 1 out of 4 children will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16 and some of these children will develop CTS
 - If left untreated, CTS can lead to long term difficulties in school, relationships and jobs.

Signs & Symptoms

People respond in different ways to extreme trauma. Some people may:

- Re-live the event.
- Avoid reminders and experience frequent flashbacks.
- Have ongoing fears related to the disaster (involving loss or separation from parents).
- Have sleep disturbances or nightmares.
- Look as if he/she is on guard, is uneasy or jumpy.
- Seem disconnected or have relationship problems.
- Have psychiatric problems such as depression, suicidal thoughts, dissociation (losing conscious awareness of the “here and now”), or anxiety.
- Engage in aggressive and/or self-destructive behavior (i.e., alcohol or drug abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors).
- Have physical complaints (i.e., stress-related conditions, eating disorders, headaches).
- Have lower grade point averages.
- Receive more negative remarks from faculty.
- Have more absences from school/refusal to go to school.
- Experience concentration difficulties or irritability.

What can we do about it?

- Early intervention is critical
- Address the 3R’s of School Crises and Disasters:
 - Readiness: Be prepared to respond to crisis if it were to happen today.
 - Response: The sum total of the resources and skills used in order to take action once a crisis takes place.
 - Recovery: Bringing the school community back to a cohesive social and emotional unit.
- Remember that you are a role model for the student.
 - Students will immediately pick up on how you respond to traumatic events.
- Refer the child to the school’s counselor or a medical professional.
- Alert the student’s parents.
- Answer you’re the student’s questions.
 - Be as honest as possible.
 - Use simple words.
 - Listen intently.
 - Be prepared to repeat answers and conversations.
 - Offer plenty of class time for discussion if appropriate.
 - Avoid rumors and misconceptions.
 - Make sure the students know that their feelings are perfectly normal.
- Implement activities aside from just open discussion (e.g. art projects) that may allow the students to express what they are feeling.
- Try to stick to as normal as a classroom routine as possible.

Key Resources & Links

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: The Effects of Trauma on Schools and Learning: Defines Traumatic events, discusses the effects of trauma on different aged students and their ability to learn. http://www.nctsn.org/ncets/nav.do?pid=ctr_aud_schl_effects

- **National Institute of Mental Health: Helping Children and Adolescents cope with violence and disasters:** Defines trauma, describes how children react to trauma and how to help them, including tips for teachers. Also defines PTSD and its treatments.
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-what-parents-can-do.shtml>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Defines PTSD, and gives symptoms of PTSD.
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/ptsd70.htm>
- **American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: Talking to Children about Terrorism and War:** Tips on how to talk to children after a traumatic event occurs, not limited to terrorism/war.
<http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/87.htm>
- **Dealing With Tragedy:** Tips for teachers. <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/tips.html>
- **Thirteen Online Education: Dealing With Tragedy:** Links to lesson plans to use in response to traumatic events. <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/tips.html#lessonplans>
- **PBS: America Responds:** Links to lesson plans to teach lessons about the important lessons to be learned from tragedy. <http://www.pbs.org/americaresponds/educators.html>
- **National Center for PTSD/ PTSD in Children and Adolescents:** Offers a fact sheet for PTSD in children and adolescents including diagnosis of PTSD, causes, risk factors, symptoms, and treatment.
http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_children.html

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*