

# The mental and psychological effects on trauma on children

## Other formats

**If you need this information in another format such as audio tape or computer disk, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please telephone the PALS desk on 01271 314090.**

Emotional or psychological trauma results from experiences that make you feel terrified, helpless, unprepared or alone. It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic, but the subjective, emotional experience.

Children who have been injured in an accident, or who have faced a trauma can suffer varying degrees of mental and psychological distress. It is therefore important that their needs are recognised and supported. Some people can suffer physical trauma with no psychological consequences. However, others may be profoundly affected by a relatively minor accident, witnessing an accident, having surgery or even coming into hospital.

Adults may think that children are too young to understand and it is best not to talk to them about what is happening, but young children are affected by traumatic events even though they may not understand what happened.

## Possible reactions to trauma on children and young people

- Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts. Self-consciousness and embarrassment (physical evidence of trauma). Regression for example, needing a dummy again and bed wetting if previously dry.
- Physical problems - changes in appetite, skin problems, sickness, headaches and general aches and pains.
- Emotional reactions – fear, sadness, attention-seeking, guilt, shame, tearful, clingy, demanding attention and mood swings.
- General reactions – resistance to authority and change in attitudes to life, obsessive thoughts, recklessness, increased competitiveness, general withdrawal.
- Concentration difficulties, confusion, refusal to go to school.

- Fears for the safety of others. Repetitive behaviour and questioning. Inability to interact with others and general withdrawing.

## What to do to help

- Acknowledge these are normal reactions, and should fade after a few weeks. Communicate openly with your child. They may look to you for clues as to how to respond, so let them see you are positive.
- Try not to push the child/young person to discuss the event immediately afterwards. This 'debriefing' has been shown not only to be ineffective, but potentially harmful.
- Provide reassurance, encourage child to discuss feelings when ready. Relaxation and distraction can help.
- Provide comforting bedtime routines. The child may want to sleep in same room as parents, and with light on.
- Try to spend extra time replacing bad memories with good ones, such as games and stories.
- If symptoms worsen, seek medical help. Your GP should be able to refer you to the appropriate professional.
- Let child's school/nursery know of accident and reaction. Health visitor or school nurse may be an additional source of help and support.

## Other general sources of support

WAND Mental Health Helpline

Freephone: 0808 800 0312 (Mon, Wed, Fri & Sun, 8pm – 11pm)

Tel: 01271 372830

Website: [www.wandmentahealth.co.uk](http://www.wandmentahealth.co.uk)

Email: [wand@wandmentalhealth.co.uk](mailto:wand@wandmentalhealth.co.uk)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network – [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Helpguide.org – [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)

Young Minds – Tel: 0345 626376

Parentline – Tel: 01702 559900

The Samaritans – Tel: 0345 909090

Childline – Tel: 0800 1111

## References

DiGallo, Barton and Parry-Jones (1997) Road Traffic Accidents: Psychological consequences in children and adolescents. *British journal of psychiatry*. 170. 358-362.

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Hill, BBC News (1998) Health: Child Accident Victims Suffer Trauma.

Mayou and Farmer (2002) ABC of psychological medicine: Trauma. *British Medical Journal*. 325, 426-7.

Smith, Jaffe and Segal (2008) Emotional and psychological Trauma: Recognising the symptoms and getting help. Internet search. 05/08/08

NAWCH (1997) The Emotional needs of children undergoing surgery. London NAWCH.

Tryna (1998) Providing emotional support to children and their families after an accident. London Child Accident Prevention Trust.

Early Childhood Trauma – [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) accessed 06/08/2014

Emotional and Psychological Trauma – [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org) accessed 06/08/2014.

## Further information

Contact: Rebecca Taylor on [rebeccataylor6@nhs.net](mailto:rebeccataylor6@nhs.net) or 07789 941180.

### **PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email: [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple. Alternatively, it may be possible for us to arrange an appointment in your area.

## Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of the ward staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Patient Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at [www.patientopinion.org.uk](http://www.patientopinion.org.uk).

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