

Supporting your child's recovery after trauma



Almost all children, young people and adults recover after the impact of a traumatic event. Some will recover quickly in the weeks and months after the event. For others it may be longer - months or even years. To recover from the impact of a traumatic event does not mean to forget it, or get over it. It also doesn't mean that things will be back to exactly how they were before the event.

Supporting children's recovery

For children, recovery happens over time when the child is able to move forward to where they are able to enjoy engaging in the activities that they previously took part in, such as going to school, playing with friends and spending time with family, without having thoughts, feelings or memories of the traumatic event causing them ongoing distress.

The length of time that it takes to recover from a traumatic event is different for every child and depends on many different factors. These include things such as:

- » The nature of the traumatic event. For example, whether the event was a 'one-off' such as a car accident, or a natural disaster; or whether it was a series of events that occurred repeatedly over time, such as child abuse or witnessing domestic violence.
- » Individual characteristics of the child, such as their temperament, age and developmental stage.
- » Whether there has been significant disruption to the child's life, or whether the child has been able to return

to their usual routine.

- » The impact that the event has had on the child's main supports in the family and how they are also coping with this.

The path that many people take to recovery is sometimes called the recovery process. It is important to be mindful and aware that this path looks different for everyone and that the needs and sensitivities of each child should be taken into account in helping them along this path. For children, this means being mindful of how age, developmental stages and other factors influence the child's recovery. All children will also travel along this path at their own pace and should not be rushed to be back to their 'normal self'.

Protective factors for children

We know a lot about what supports or promotes the path to recovery. For children, there are many protective factors that can help to lessen the impact of the traumatic event on the child and that can also help to support children in recovery. Some of the protective factors for children include:

- » Good relationships. These include relationships with family and caregivers that are trusting, supportive and safe for the child. It also includes good relationships for children in other systems that support them, such as at school.
- » Feelings of safety, whether this be at home or at school. Children need to feel safe and secure in order for them to move forward from their traumatic experience.
- » Social and family supports. This includes relationships that the child has outside of the home, for example,

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having friends at school, being involved in a sporting team or other extra curricular activity and having family friends around who are also able to provide support to everyone in the family.

How parents & families can help

The way that families cope, and the way that children are supported in families after a traumatic event, can be crucial to a child's recovery.

In the days, weeks and months after a traumatic event it is helpful for parents and carers to educate themselves about how their child may cope and the challenges they may face. There is some great information available on the internet, and some links to these can be found on the *Trauma & Grief: Supporting Families* website. Parents and carers should also turn to a GP, child health worker or school counsellor to find out more about the ways a traumatic impact may impact on children.

Knowing more about how your child may possibly react can help parents to support their children. Ways that parents can provide support include:

- » Acknowledging children's feelings of loss and fear and other emotions when they are present.
- » Providing assurance that the thoughts, feelings and reactions are normal even though they may be upsetting.
- » Reassuring children that they will feel better over time and that some children need extra support to feel better.
- » Encouraging children to feel free to talk if they wish, but also to be aware that it can be a sign that children are not coping well if they are talking about the event all the time.
- » Modeling positive coping strategies. Children who see their parents using a number of positive coping strategies to cope with difficult circumstances are more likely to also cope better themselves.

- » Keeping an optimistic view of the future to demonstrate that even though things may be especially difficult right now, there is hope that things will get better.

Parent can also support children by helping them to recognise what has been gained or learned since the traumatic event took place. Most children, and adults, will use their strengths to get through a traumatic experience and it is important that these are recognised.

Positive journeys can be recognised by:

- » Looking at the gains the child has made over time. Sometimes this can be done by looking at children's pictures or writing, or by talking with the child. Adults can highlight how strong the child has become since the event.
- » Recognising the positives of acknowledging how the child has been helped and supported by those around them.
- » Thinking about good things that the child has done since the traumatic experience and what good things may happen in the future.
- » Helping the child to recognise and celebrate their own strengths and progress.
- » Helping children to develop their knowledge about what can make them feel better.

Parents, carers and other family members also need to be supported on the journey to recovery. Parents need to be supported in their own emotional responses to their child's trauma. When parents are able to model good coping skills and are able to promote these in their children, all members of the family do better.

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