

Services available

At any time, it is possible to ask for help from a health and social services professional.

It's free and confidential.

- > Centre de santé et de services sociaux (CSSS)
- > Info-Santé and Info-Social: 8-1-1
- > Physician
- > Suicide prevention:
1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)

Information is also available on the following websites:

- > Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux
www.msss.gouv.qc.ca
- > Info-trauma
www.info-trauma.org
- > Centre d'étude sur le trauma
www.plusqu1souvenir.ca
- > Urgence Québec
www.urgencequebec.gouv.qc.ca



MY CHILD WAS CONFRONTED WITH A TRAUMATIC EVENT

A traumatic event confronts individuals directly with death or the fear of dying, or may have threatened their own or another person's physical integrity. This event occurred suddenly, intensely, unpredictably and uncontrollably. It triggered a strong reaction, a feeling of powerlessness or horror. A traumatic event may occur during an accident, a violent act or a disaster, or in other situations.

This is an information tool for parents whose child was confronted with a traumatic event, especially a disaster. It presents specifics on reactions observed in children, information on post-traumatic stress disorder, ways to help your child, and how to recognize when to consult the available resources.

Frequent reactions when confronted with a disaster

Refer to

"After a disaster"

or

"Coping with a traumatic event"

Special conditions in children

In addition to the reactions frequently shown by everyone confronted with a disaster, children are likely to become agitated and anxious, have difficulty controlling themselves and exhibit physical reactions, such as tremors and increased heart rate. Usually these reactions are short-term, from a few days to a few weeks.

Young children's reactions may be exhibited differently, because they do not necessarily have the vocabulary to express what they understand and feel about a traumatic event. In this sense, young children tend to react in behavioural terms, and in the course of everyday activities, such as mealtime, bedtime, bath time, play, etc.

In addition to typical adolescent behaviour, adolescents may show unusual reactions in terms of sleep and appetite and seem to lose interest in their friends, school activities, work and leisure. Adolescents may also exhibit problems of alcohol or drug abuse and behavioural disorders.

We should mention that children exposed to the same traumatic event may react differently. More specifically, children's reactions may be influenced by their age, level of development, temperament, personality and the reactions of the people around them.

It is important to remember that these reactions are normal when faced with a situation that is abnormal.

It is estimated that one out of four children will experience a traumatic event during childhood. Most will be able to deal with the situation without too many complications. However, for some children, the reactions or symptoms may persist and be transformed into post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is defined as "a reactive condition that may develop after a traumatic event".

The physical and psychological symptoms described below may appear rapidly, several weeks or even several months after being confronted, directly or indirectly, with a traumatic event. In the case of PTSD, instead of fading away, these symptoms are established chronically and are felt with the same intensity as during the first exposure to the traumatizing situation. It is estimated that one out of ten people confronted with a traumatic event will develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

What are the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?

Individuals who develop post-traumatic stress disorder may exhibit the following symptoms:

Intrusions: Individuals are invaded by images, sounds, odours and emotions that remind them of the event (flashback). They may also have nightmares and continually have the impression of reliving the event or fear that it will happen again.

Avoidance: Consciously or unconsciously, individuals constantly seek to avoid everything that could be a reminder of the event. It is difficult to talk about it and they make efforts to avoid painful memories of the traumatic event.

Physical symptoms and hypervigilance: Individuals can have headaches and other physical pains, sleep disorders, tremors, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, anger, agitation, attention and concentration difficulties, etc. They are constantly on high alert and jumpy, even in the absence of danger.

Children may also have difficulty remembering important aspects of the event. They may refuse to go to school and adopt regressive behaviours, such as refusing to sleep in their bed or wetting their bed. They may also lose interest in everyday activities, lose appetite, be in conflict more often with the people around them, feel guilty about what happened, exhibit attention and concentration problems, etc.

The intensity of these reactions over a long period may cause children to burn out gradually and have difficulty functioning normally and regaining their balance.

If these symptoms persist for more than four weeks, it is important to consult a professional to evaluate your child's situation and receive the appropriate services.

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How can you help your child after a traumatic event?

The fact that a child was exposed to a traumatic event is often a great source of concern for the parents and affects the entire family. It is therefore completely normal to look for ways to help your child adapt to the situation.

- > If the traumatic event caused the death of a significant person for the child, such as a friend or a family member, grieving reactions may also appear.
- > It is possible to target certain means of coping with such an event and integrate them into your everyday life to help your child after exposure to a traumatic event.
- > Try to restore your children's sense of security as much as possible, by explaining that the adults around them are there to protect them. Reassure them that they are now safe.
- > Pay attention to the reactions your children may exhibit. Without forcing them, let them talk about what happened or express what they feel through their play, drawings, etc. It is important that children feel that they can count on the support of the adults around them during more difficult times.
- > Pay attention to your own reactions and those of people around them, because children can be greatly influenced by how the people around them react. For example, they could copy the reactions they observe around them.
- > Depending on their age, avoid exposing children to television and Internet images. For example, younger children are unable to understand that these images are replays.
- > For older children, inform them about the reactions generally felt after such an event. Emphasize that these reactions are normal.
- > If children seem to feel guilty, take time to explain that they are not responsible for what happened.
- > Maintain the family routine, as much as possible, as it was before the event. This will show the child that even though the event was traumatic, it has not dominated family life. Favour resumption of play, sports, leisure activities, contact with friends, etc.
- > Maintain contact with school or daycare staff to ensure that the child is able to function normally in this environment.
- > Learn about childhood trauma from reliable and recognized information sources. This will help you understand your child's situation better.
- > Be patient. The adjustment process may take longer for some children, especially younger children.

- > Respect their rhythm. It is useless to pressure them, because they could interpret this as a lack of understanding on your part.
- > Also take care of yourself as a parent and an individual in your own right. Maintain good living hygiene and engage in exercise. Allow yourself moments of relaxation and fun. Don't stay alone and don't hesitate to talk about your experience with trusted people in your circle. Don't let your everyday difficulties accumulate. Take one problem at a time and provide a solution. Accept that you can't control everything.

When is it necessary to ask for help?

When the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder persist and the child is unable to regain normal functioning at home, at school or in leisure activities for several weeks, it is important to consult a professional. This may be a physician, a psychologist or a social worker, who can help the child and support you as a parent.

For most children exposed to a traumatic event, it is important to remember that their symptoms will disappear during the first month. For some, these symptoms will only appear several months, or even years, after the event.

It is also possible that you will have difficulty functioning after such an event, as a parent and as an individual in your own right. Don't hesitate to ask for help.