



MY CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED A POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENT

A potentially traumatic event is characterized by being directly confronted with death, the fear of dying, or when one's physical integrity or that of another person may have been threatened. This event happened suddenly, intensely, unpredictably, and uncontrollably. It provoked a strong reaction, a feeling of helplessness or horror. A potentially traumatic event can occur during an accident, a violent act, or a disaster, to name just a few examples.

This fact sheet is an information tool for parents whose child has experienced a potentially traumatic event, particularly a disaster. It presents the particularities of the reactions observed in children, information on post-traumatic stress disorder, ways to help your child, and how to recognize when it is time to consult the available resources.

Frequent reactions in people faced with a disaster

Refer to the fact sheets
A disaster has occurred
or
Coping with a potentially traumatic event

Particularities in children

In addition to the reactions common to all people faced with a disaster, children are likely to become restless and anxious, have difficulty controlling themselves, and exhibit physical reactions such as tremors and increased heart rate. These reactions are usually short-lived, lasting from a few days to a few weeks.

The reactions of young children may manifest differently as they do not necessarily have the vocabulary to express what they understand and feel about the event. In this sense, the reactions of young children tend to be more behavioural and manifest in everyday activities such as eating, sleeping, bathing, playing, etc.

Adolescents may show unusual reactions in terms of sleep and appetite, and they may seem to lose interest in friends, school activities, work, and hobbies. They may also have problems with alcohol or drug abuse, as well as behavioural problems.

It is important to note that children who are exposed to the same event may react differently from one another. More specifically, children's reactions may be influenced by their age, level of development, temperament, and personality, **as well as by the reactions of those around them.**

It is important to remember that these reactions are normal in the face of a situation that is not normal.

It is estimated that approximately one in four children will experience a potentially traumatic event during their childhood. Most will be able to deal with the situation without too many complications. For some children, however, the reactions or symptoms may persist and develop into post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is defined as a high level of anxiety, characterized by a feeling of intense fear, which can appear following a traumatic event.¹

The physical and psychological symptoms described below may appear quickly or several weeks or even months after being confronted, directly or indirectly, with a potentially traumatic event. In the case of PTSD, these symptoms, instead of resolving, become chronic and are felt with the same intensity as upon first exposure to the traumatic situation. It is estimated that one in ten people who have been confronted with a potentially traumatic event will develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

What are the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?

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

Intrusions: People are inundated by images, sounds, smells, and emotions that remind them of the event (flashback). They may also have nightmares and continually feel as though they are reliving the event or that it will happen again.

Avoidance: People continually try, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid anything that might remind them of the event. It is difficult for them to talk about the event, and they make efforts to avoid painful memories of the event.

Physical symptoms and hypervigilance: People may experience headaches and other physical pain, sleep problems, tremors, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, anger, restlessness, difficulty paying attention and concentrating, etc. People are constantly on alert and easily startled despite the absence of danger.

In addition, children may have difficulty remembering important aspects of the event. They may refuse to go to school, engage in regressive behaviours such as refusing to sleep in their bed or urinating in their bed. They may also lose interest in everyday activities, have less of an appetite, be more often in conflict with those around them, feel guilty about what happened, have problems with attention and concentration, etc.

The intensity of these reactions over a long period of time can gradually cause children to become exhausted and have difficulty functioning normally and regaining their balance.

If these symptoms persist, it is important to consult a health and social services professional in order to properly assess your child's situation and receive the appropriate services.

1. Gouvernement du Québec, État de stress post-traumatique (ESPT), repéré le 5 novembre 2024 à <https://www.quebec.ca/sante/sante-mentale/s-informer-sur-sante-mentale-et-troubles-mentaux/mieux-comprendre-troubles-mentaux/etat-stress-post-traumatique>

How to help your child following a potentially traumatic event

The fact that a child has been exposed to a potentially traumatic event is often a source of great concern for parents and affects the whole family. It is therefore completely normal to want to understand how to help your child cope with the situation.

If the event resulted in the death of someone significant to the child, a friend or family member, grief-related reactions may also be present.

There are some things that can be done to help your child following exposure to a potentially traumatic event, which can be identified and incorporated into their daily life.

- Try to restore your child'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 safe now.
 - Pay attention to your child's reactions. Allow them, without forcing them, to talk about it or express their feelings through play, drawings, etc. It is important that they feel that they can count on the support of the adults around them during the most difficult moments.
 - Pay attention to your own reactions and those of the people around you, since children can be greatly influenced by the way those around them react. They may, for example, copy the reactions they observe around them.
 - Depending on their age, avoid exposing the child to images on television and the internet. Younger children, for example, have difficulty understanding that these are images from the past.
 - For older children, educate them on the reactions that are commonly experienced after a similar event. Emphasize that these reactions are normal.
 - If the child seems to be feeling guilty, take the time to explain that they are not responsible for what happened.
 - Insofar as possible, maintain the family routine as it was before the event. This will show the child that the event, however traumatic, has not taken over family life. Encourage the resumption of play, sports activities, hobbies, contact with friends, etc.
- Keep in touch with school or daycare staff to ensure that they are able to function normally in these areas.
 - Learn about the issue of trauma in children from reliable and reputable sources of information. This will help you better understand your child's situation.
 - Be patient. The adjustment process may take longer for some children, including younger children. Respect your child's pace. There is no point in rushing your child, as they may interpret this as a lack of understanding on your part.
 - Also take care of yourself as a parent and as an individual in your own right. Maintain a healthy lifestyle, get some exercise. Allow yourself time to relax and enjoy yourself. Don't be alone, and don't hesitate to talk about your experience with trusted people around you. Don't let your everyday difficulties pile up. Take one problem at a time and work through it. 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 return to normal functioning at home, at school, and in their leisure activities after a few weeks, it is important to consult a health and social services professional who will be able to help and support you as a parent.

It is important to remember that most children who are exposed to a potentially traumatic event will have their symptoms disappear within the first month. For some, these symptoms will only appear several months or even years after the event.

As a parent and as an individual in your own right, you may also find it difficult to function after a similar event. Don't hesitate to ask for help.

Where can I get help?

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

By contacting:

- › Info-Social 811
- › Family medicine group (MFG)
- › Deuil-Jeunesse: 1-855-889-3666
- › Tel-Jeunes: 1-800-263-2266
- › Ligne Parents: 1-800-361-5085

Information is also available at the following links:

- › Getting better following a disaster
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies/emergency-situations-disasters-and-natural-hazards/getting-better-following-disaster
- › Trauma Studies Center trauma.
crusmm.net/en/
- › Deuil-Jeunesse
deuil-jeunesse.com/
- › Tel-Jeunes
www.teljeunes.com/Home