Coping with the Unexpected: Helping Children and Adolescents through Accidents and Traumatic Events

Accidents and traumatic events do not only affect adults, but also cause immense stress and a range of psychological reactions to children and adolescents. Apart from managing their own responses in the aftermath of the incident, parents also need to help their children deal with the trauma and distress. This pamphlet introduces how children and adolescents at different ages may react to traumatic events, and provides recommendations for their recovery as well as self-help tips for adolescents. From this pamphlet, parents and caregivers can learn ways to handle children's and adolescents' post-traumatic responses, so as to provide necessary support and care to facilitate their recovery.

Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

What is trauma?

A trauma is an experience that threatens life or causes physical injury, and is so powerful and dangerous that it overwhelms children's capacity to regulate their emotions. Children can be traumatized through direct exposure to overwhelming situations, such as: physical or sexual abuse, abandonment or neglect, loss of a loved one, a caregiver experiencing a life-threatening illness, being bullied, and being involved in traffic or other serious accidents. Traumatic responses may also be triggered indirectly by seeing and hearing traumatic events, such as witnessing incidents of domestic violence, robbery, natural disaster or terrorist attack, etc.

Unfortunately, persistent myths can stand in the way of appropriate care and support for children going through grief, such as "the child was so young when it happened they won't remember" or "if we don't mention it, they will forget about it eventually". However, such misperceptions often neglect or underestimate the impact of trauma on young children. As young children are highly dependent on their caregivers and their brains and bodies have not yet fully developed, they are much more vulnerable to trauma than adults. Studies show that trauma significantly impacts on children's emotion, behavior, memory and learning capacity. Young children's perception towards the traumatic experience is greatly influenced by their developmental stage, and their reactions to trauma and the symptom duration may vary individually.

Reactions to Trauma

Infants and Toddlers (Age 0 to 2)

Infants and toddlers need a consistent caregiver and a stable environment to secure their growth and development. Changes in daily routine and environmental disturbances will affect their sense of safety and security, leading to feelings of helplessness and distress. Feelings of fear and anxiety are real and vivid to children. Traumatic events are encrypted in their memories through perception and sensations, such as sights, sounds, smells, and movements. Caregivers can understand more about their children's fears by observing their emotional and behavioral responses.

Emotional:

- Demonstrating high levels of distress when separated from their parents or caregivers, and show fear of going to sleep (especially when alone)
- Having nightmares, cries excessively or stays overly quiet, are sensitive to noise, and difficult to be soothed
- Are hypervigilant and appear to be in a state of shock, or numb as if they were disconnected from their surroundings

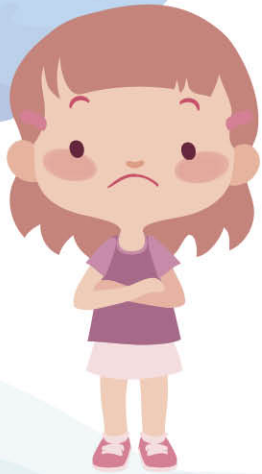
Behavioral:

- Exhibiting loss of appetite, avoidance of eye contact, and decreased interest in play and interactions
- Restlessness and showing uncharacteristic aggression
- Showing regression in behavior such as loss of skills already mastered including rolling over, crawling, sitting and walking etc.

Reactions to Trauma

Preschoolers (Age 3 to 6)

Preschool children may not understand the irreversibility of a traumatic event. Some traumatized children might repeatedly re-enact parts of the traumatic event in their play in an attempt to alleviate distress by altering the outcome of the trauma. Paying close attention to children's behavior and their play can help you understand the impact of the trauma on them.

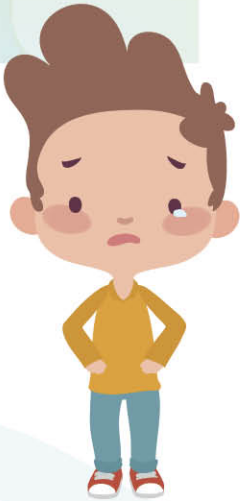


- Exhibiting emergence of or increased clingy behavior, such as closely following a parent or caregiver around and/ or showing anxiety when being separated from them
- Are emotionally anxious and distressed and startled easily, having frequent nightmares, frequent crying spells, and expressing fear of darkness, monsters and strangers
- Withdrawing socially and losing interest in daily activities, or are restless and showing uncharacteristic aggression
- Showing regression in behavior, such as difficulties in falling asleep, speech problems, drop in appetite or overeating, bedwetting/ soiling, and problems with attention.
- Physical complaints (e.g. stomachache, headache) with no obvious physical cause
- Repeatedly mentioning the traumatic experience, self-blaming, or believe that the traumatic event was their fault
- Making statements or queries about death

Ways to Help with Recovery

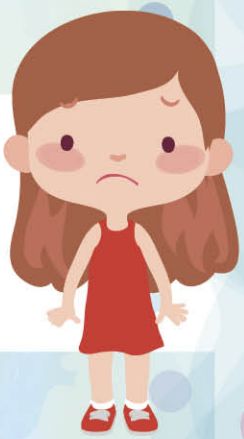
Resuming Daily Routine

- Resume normal routines and usual activities as soon as possible
- Re-establish a safe and secure environment



Understanding The Traumatic Event

- Share and process the traumatic experience with children in a safe and accepting way
- Explain the trauma to children according to their level of understanding, and answer their questions in a genuine and simple manner

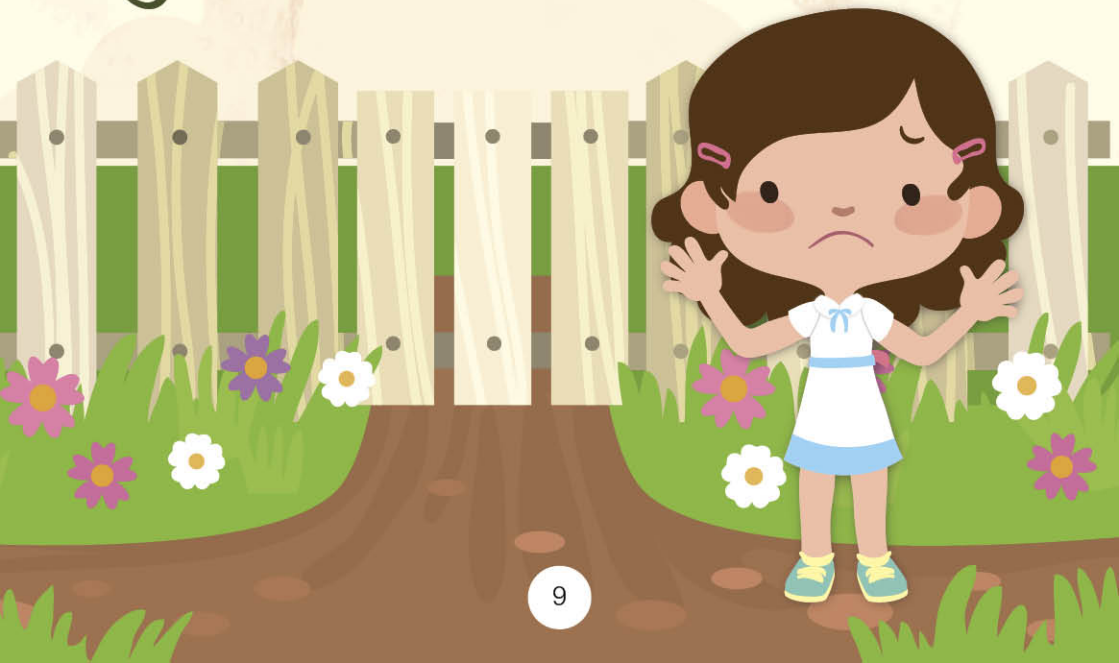


Handling Intense Emotions

- Coach children on how to manage overwhelming emotional reactions
- Assist children to process and express feelings appropriately

School-aged Children

Traumatic events and accidents happen unexpectedly when we are least prepared. These incidents do not only affect adults, but will also bring great stress to children, leading to different responses.



Reactions to Trauma

Physical:

- Physical complaints, such as headache, stomachache and nausea
- Sleep disturbance and frequent nightmares

Emotional:

- Fear
- Depression
- Self-blame
- Guilt
- Emotional arousal in situations similar to the traumatic event

Cognitive:

- Absent-mindedness
- Partial memory loss related to the traumatic event
- Attention problem
- Memory problem
- Impaired learning ability, drop in academic performance, being unwilling or afraid to go to school
- Excessive concern for family's safety, regressive symptoms

Social:

- Withdrawal from others, self-isolation
- Becoming aggressive, or fighting with others
- Competing with siblings for attention
- Over-dependence
- Avoidance of anything associated with the traumatic event
- Loss of interest in usual activities and hobbies

Spiritual:

- Becoming pessimistic and feeling helpless

Ways to Help with Recovery

How can parents help children recover from traumatic events?

Cognitive:

- Help them express their feelings and views on the incident. Clarify any misconceptions or doubts
- Spend more time talking to them. Listen with patience to understand their worries and fears

Emotional:

- Assure them that their reactions and feelings are normal. Explain that many people with a similar experience react in the same way
- Explain that the traumatic event was not their fault. They don't need to feel guilty or blame themselves

Behavioral:

- Encourage them to show concern for the injured or deceased, such as offering blessings, condolences or donations
- Keep the family together as much as possible. If the children have to be left with a relative or friend, explain to them beforehand to avoid misunderstandings and anxiety. Keep in contact and take them home as soon as possible
- Speak with the teacher if the children show difficulty at home or at school. Collaborate to sort out solutions
- Play with them. Gross-motor activities, which involve the use of large muscles (e.g. ball games, cycling), are highly recommended as they facilitate relaxation and stress relief

Adolescents

Disasters often strike unexpectedly when we are least prepared, making us feel shocked, confused, anxious and numb. Even after the incident, some emotions, images and thoughts may linger on and be exacerbated by repeated exposure to media coverage of the incident. The following are some commonly experienced reactions:

Physical:

- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Sleep disturbance
- Bodily reactions when encountering reminders of the incident, such as dizziness, palpitation, difficulty in breathing, and sweating, etc.

Emotional:

- Numbness
- Mood fluctuations
- Easily startled
- Irritability
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Depression
- Sense of insecurity

Cognitive:

- Poor concentration and forgetfulness
- Intrusive memories of the traumatic event
- Absent-mindedness, and reduced ability in judgment and decision making

Behavioral:

- Childish behaviors
- Increased dependence
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of motivation, reduced academic performance
- Irritability, impulsivity and reckless behaviors
- Drinking, smoking, or drug taking to alleviate the distress of the experience
- Avoidance of people, things or places that are related to the incident

The above reactions vary between individuals and may not fully apply to everyone. It is important to know how to take good care of ourselves as most people are able to cope with the reactions and move on with their lives.

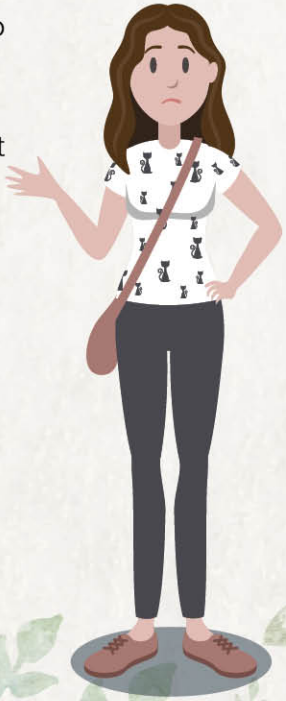
I Can Help Myself
(Self-help Guide for Adolescents)

Try the following to make yourself feel better:

- Share your feelings with friends or adults who you trust and who are good listeners
- Hang out with friends to relax
- Accept help from family and friends. Hug those you love and trust
- Listen to your favorite music
- Do moderate amount of physical exercise (e.g. jogging, cycling, swimming and dancing). Sweating helps alleviate stress
- Maintain a balanced diet, enjoy the food you like
- Engage in activities which allow you to focus and relax (e.g. playing the piano, drawing and knitting)
- Take a hot shower or bath
- Practice relaxation techniques
- Encourage yourself with positive self-talk, e.g. 'the incident is over' or 'I can get through this'

Please Do Not

- Believe that you are going 'crazy'. A lot of people experience strong and complex reactions after disasters
- Force yourself to forget about the upsetting event
- Self-blame or over-suppress your own feelings
- Isolate yourself
- Resort to drugs, cigarettes or alcohol to numb your feelings
- Expect yourself to recover within a short period of time



What Can Parents Do?
(How to Support Adolescents)

Provide them with information about the incident so that they can understand what has happened to avoid any misconceptions

Help them understand what anxiety is and the ways to cope with anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder

Let them know they are not 'crazy'. What they experience are normal reactions to trauma

Be accepting and supportive. Spend time with them (e.g. doing physical exercise or other activities together)

Encourage them to support others if appropriate, e.g. involve them in rebuilding the community or helping other people affected by the disaster, such as little children or the elderly. Allow them to ventilate their feelings through positive channels

For emotional, angry, aggressive, or uncooperative children, be patient when comforting them

For quiet or unresponsive children, comfort them by giving them a hug, holding their hands, satisfying their physical needs, and speaking softly

Pay attention to changes in behavior, especially risk-taking behaviors e.g. excessive drinking or self-harming

Alarm signals

Usually, emotional responses in children will not last long, but parents should be alert to the following signs:

- Frequently re-enacting the incident in play, having frequent nightmares and become easily aroused in similar situations
- Sleep disturbances, irritability, becoming easily frightened, poor concentration, regressive symptoms, and partial memory loss related to the traumatic experience
- Avoidance of people, things or places that are related to the incident, unresponsiveness and loss of interest

If these symptoms and the various reactions persist for more than a month, and are affecting the children's daily routine, professional advice (from a clinical psychologist, doctor, or counsellor) should be sought as soon as possible.

Traumatic events can impact on the family and put couple relationships to the test. It is easy to overlook your partner's feelings when both people are disturbed and experiencing various kinds of emotional reactions. Conflicts often arise, straining the couple's relationship. Apart from looking after the children, couples also need to support and care for each other while handling their own emotional responses. By looking after yourselves, you can help your children cope effectively with accidents and traumatic events.

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For more disaster-related psycho-educational resources, please visit https://hadps.ha.org.hk/.

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