
Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Children

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a series of symptoms that happen after a distressing event. A child may have anxiety, anger, and bad dreams. But PTSD can be treated. Working with a counselor and other healthcare providers will help your child. Recovery may take time. But your child can feel better.

Who is at risk for PTSD?

PTSD may follow a severe trauma. It may be something the child experiences. Or it may be an event the child sees or hears about. Even violent movies or TV shows can cause trauma.

A child is at risk for PTSD after any of these:

- A rape or sexual assault
- A car accident or plane crash
- Physical or mental abuse
- Being a victim or witness of violence, such as riots or wars
- Natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods
- The sudden death of a parent or other loved one

Symptoms of PTSD in children

Symptoms of PTSD often appear a few weeks after the trauma. But sometimes they may occur months or years later. A child with PTSD may have:

- Bad dreams about the event
- Vivid memories of the event that seem real (flashbacks)
- A fear of people or places connected with the event
- Reactions to things that remind them of the event (trauma cues) such as sights, sounds, people, smells, and places

And they may:

- Seem withdrawn and unfeeling
- Be nervous
- Have angry outbursts
- Have trouble sleeping or focusing
- Have headaches or other health problems

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- Reenact the event over and over in play

Treating PTSD

PTSD in a child can be treated with:

- Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy
- Other types of 1-on-1 or group talk therapy
- Medicines to manage anxiety, insomnia, and depression

It's also important for a child to be with other children. It can make them feel less alone. And will help them work through their pain.

What you can do

You can play a large part in your child's healing process. You can:

- Accept your child's emotions. Remind them of your love and support.
- Encourage them to share their feelings with you or a trusted healthcare provider.
- Schedule ongoing mental healthcare for them.
- If PTSD causes problems with schoolwork or friendships, ask school staff for support.