

Young People and Traumatic Events: Information for Teachers

Traumatic events can be single experiences or multiple and recurring. Trauma can be an event directly experienced or something witnessed or learnt about. It can cause terror, fear, horror or helplessness. Traumatic events may also lead to physical symptoms such as an increased heart rate, strong startle responses and shakiness. The impact does not simply go away when the traumatic event is over. Instead, traumatic events can change the way young people and adults see both themselves and their world.

Both research and wisdom show us that regardless of the adversity that young people face, if they can develop and maintain a positive attachment to school and gain an enthusiasm for learning, they will do so much better in their lives. Therefore, the role of teachers in the lives of traumatised young people cannot be underestimated.

Teachers who understand the effects of trauma on a young person's education, are then better able to develop appropriate teaching practices that enable improved engagement and will not only improve educational outcomes but will assist in their healing and recovery.

What can happen after a traumatic event?

- > **Shock** - young people may feel stunned, dazed or numb. They may cut off from their feelings, or what is going on around them.
- > **Denial** – they can't accept what has happened so they may behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think they are being strong, or the young person doesn't care about what has happened.

After the experience of a single traumatic event the feelings of shock gradually fade and other thoughts and feelings take their place. When there have been multiple traumatic events the feelings may linger.

Remember that the severity of the event does not predict the level of emotional impact (i.e. a less severe event doesn't mean a less emotional response).

What happens next?

Young people react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of feelings they may have including:

- > **Frightened** that the same thing will happen again, or that they might lose control of their feelings and break down.
- > **Helpless** that something really bad happened and they could do nothing about it. They may feel vulnerable and overwhelmed.
- > **Angry** about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.



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- > **Guilty** that they have survived when others have suffered or died. They may feel they could have done something to prevent it.
 - > **Sad** particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone they knew.
 - > **Ashamed** or embarrassed that they have these strong feelings they can't control, especially if they need others to support them.
 - > **Relieved** that they are out of danger.
 - > **Hopeful** that their life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.

What else might you notice?

Strong feelings affect physical health. In the weeks after a traumatic event, you may notice young people experiencing or talking about the following:

- > Sleeplessness
- > Tiredness
- > Dreams and nightmares
- > Poor concentration
- > Memory problems
- > Difficulty thinking clearly
- > Headaches
- > Changes in appetite
- > Aches and pains

What can be done at school to help?

Keep in mind young people often have difficulties with their concentration, attention and behaviour following significant events. Some young people may be very quiet and withdrawn, while others may be disruptive and overly active. Many will have difficulties with learning and their academic functioning will be impaired for a brief period.

It is important to invite young people and parents to let you know when a young person is affected by some change in their personal life, so that you can better understand any change in classroom behaviour or school performance.

- > Maintain usual routines. A return to “normalcy” will communicate the message that the young person is safe and life will go on. Be calm, warm and compassionate in your responses to young person’s needs and discussions.
- > Give young people choices. Often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos, so you can help a young person feel safe by providing them with some choices or control when appropriate.
- > Be sensitive to the cues in the environment that may cause a reaction in the young person. For example, victims of natural storm-related disasters might react very badly to threatening weather or storm warnings.
- > Be available to listen and to talk about the young person’s interpretation of events. Be respectful of ideas and opinions expressed, even if you do not agree with them, and take the opportunity to express your own beliefs and opinions.

This models to the young person and their caregivers that it is okay to talk openly about what has happened.

- > Young people are intimately connected to their friends and use them as primary avenues to process difficult emotional events. Encourage these connections as much as possible, but monitor the friendship groups to ensure that the support remains positive.

When should a referral be made?

- > When reactions are severe (such as intense hopelessness or fear)
- > Go on for a long time (more than one month) and
- > Interfere significantly with a young person's functioning.

As severity can sometimes be difficult to determine—don't feel you have to be certain before making a referral. Let a health professional evaluate the likelihood that the young person could benefit from some type of intervention.

Should you have any concerns about the issues raised in this fact sheet in relation to a young person, we suggest you contact your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. [Click here](#) for address and contact details for your nearest CAMHS. <http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/divisions/mentalhealth/index.html>

