

## So I survived. What next?

Sometimes after we experienced something traumatic, our bodies react in ways that we don't always understand. A lot of the anxiety after such an experience can be reduced by knowing what is going on in your body and mind and what to expect.

### Some of these reactions are:

- Adrenaline is released into the bloodstream, getting your body ready to react super fast.
- Your senses are more sensitive to your surroundings
- Glucose is released into the blood, to provide enough energy to react
- More blood is available to the big muscle groups if you have to flee or fight
- More oxygen is taken to the brain so that you can process incoming information faster
- After the event these reactions may leave you exhausted (even if you didn't flee or fight), or feeling nauseous and shivering.

### Possible Adult response to trauma

- Upsetting memories
- Images and feeling as if the event is happening again
- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when something you smell, see, feel, hear or taste reminds you of the trauma
- Feeling in danger again
- Anger or aggression, Irritable
- Trouble controlling your emotions
- Trouble concentrating, forgetfulness

- Trouble remembering important parts of the event
- Trying to avoid conversations, places or people that remind you of the event
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Constantly on the lookout for danger
- Startled by loud noises or people coming up behind you
- Feel shaky and sweaty, heart pounding or trouble breathing, feel physically numb
- Not interested in things you used to enjoy

### What do I do now?

- Follow a healthy diet to help your body deal with all the reactions. Eat food that helps to stabilize your blood sugar level (low GI foods, fruit, vegetables, water, tea)
- Do exercise to help relax muscles. When you exercise your body releases endorphins, and that makes you feel happier.
- Empower yourself by understanding your bodies reaction to Trauma.
- Share information with your friends and family to help them understand what you are going through and what they might be going through.
- Consider seeking the help of a mental health professional who is trained in helping people with traumatic responses or post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Therapy or counselling can be individual, group or family sessions that include talking, drawing and writing about the event. In some cases medication can be helpful.

*Developed by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.*

# Trauma Support SA

*Our vision is to improve access  
for Trauma Survivors  
to appropriate, effective and integrated  
Trauma Support Services in South Africa*

## Our Mission

- To raise awareness about the effects of Traumatic Stress in all South African Communities
- To train, mentor and guide volunteers in the field of trauma support to provide effective Trauma Support Services
- To build capacity in organizations in order to provide dedicated trauma support services
- To ensure that all South Africans have access to Trauma Support Services and trauma counseling

*Need Help?*

**info@tssa.org.za**

**www.tssa.org.za**



*Educating -Empowering -Equipping*

## How do children respond to a traumatic event?

There are a wide range of responses to traumatic events.

Children who have had traumatic experiences may have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares.

They may avoid activities, situations, thoughts, or conversations that may be related to the traumatic events, even if other people don't perceive them as related (e.g., a child who was eating corn flakes on the morning of a terrible event may not want to eat corn flakes).

They may play in ways that repeat something from their traumatic experiences (e.g., twirling or hiding under things after exposure to a tornado). They may recreate aspects of the traumatic experience in their behaviour (e.g., a child who was exposed to a fire may set fires).

They may not want to be with people as much as before. They may avoid school, have trouble with school-work, or feel unable to pay attention.

They may not want to play as much, avoid certain kinds of play, or lose interest in things they once enjoyed. They may be sad or seem to have less emotion or feel guilty about things they did or did not do related to the traumatic experience.

Young children (age 5 and younger) may experience new fears such as separation anxiety or fear of strangers or animals. They may act younger or lose a skill they have already mastered (such as toilet training).

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Primary school-aged children (6 to 11) may get parts of the traumatic experience confused or out of order when recalling the memory. They may complain of body symptoms that have no medical cause (e.g., stomach aches). They may stare into space or seem "spacey," or startle easily.

Adolescents (12 to 18) may experience visual, auditory, or bodily flashbacks of the events, have unwanted distressing thoughts or images of the events, demonstrate impulsive and aggressive behaviours, or use alcohol or drugs to try to feel better. They may feel depressed or have suicidal thoughts.

### When a child experiences a traumatic event, he/she may express it in the following ways:

- Repeated games where some aspect of the event is present
- Bad dreams, with or without elements of the event present
- Do things the child did when she or he was younger, like bedwetting or sucking fingers

### What can adults do to help?

- Let the child know it's normal to feel upset when something bad or scary happens
- Encourage the child to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments
- Protect the child or adolescent from further exposure to unsafe situations or stimulus as much as possible

- Return to normal routines as much as possible
- School can be a major healing environment as the child's most important routine.
- Educate school personnel about the child's needs.
- Reassure the child that it was not his or her fault, that adults will try to take care of him or her, etc.
- Allow the child to feel sad or cry
- Give the child a sense of control and choice by offering reasonable options about daily activities (choosing meals, clothes, etc.)
- If the child regresses (or starts to do things he or she did when younger), adults can help by being supportive, remembering that it is a common response to trauma, and not criticizing the behaviour
- Adults can be most helpful if they take care of themselves and get help for their own distress, since children and adolescents may respond to adults' feelings and reactions.
- Many children and adolescents will recover within a few weeks with such support, but this is also dependent on the severity of the traumatic event and the child's response.

