


What is Trauma? Should I be Concerned for My Child

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Physical trauma is described as severe injury, usually caused by a violent attack or an accident. Our mind can also become traumatized, and in this way trauma is defined as severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience. Sometimes we experience a situation so stressful that our body and mind cannot cope and make sense of it, and we become traumatized.

DO I HAVE GRIEF OR TRAUMA?

While we can think about grief as the reflective focusing on the pain of our loss and remember the person who died, trauma involves avoidance both of the death event and environmental triggers, (smells, sights, sounds) that might be reminders. At least for a while, trauma overpowers a person's grief. Often people experiencing trauma say they feel like they are going crazy. However, if we understand that mind and body reactions happen to protect us, then we know that it is quite the opposite. Trauma symptoms are there to protect us for a time after the shock of the death.



THE FOLLOWING LIST SHOWS TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF AND TRAUMA. SOME PEOPLE MAY SEE THEMSELVES IN BOTH LISTS.

Common Grief response symptoms

- Disbelief, numbness, (early in the loss) irritability, anger
- Pervasive sadness
- Yearning/longing for the person
- Grief dreams
- Reminiscing about the person who died
- Search for meaning from the death

Common Trauma responses and Symptoms

- Emotional 'numbness' or 'dissociation' that lasts a long time
- Blocked or fractured memory of the death
- Difficulty believing or accepting the death
- Intrusive images or flashbacks of the death
- Fear, terror, helplessness
- Night terrors
- Physiological reactions triggered by reminders of the death
- Fight or flight alarm responses: racing heart, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, stomach/digestive tract issues
- Hypersensitivity to sounds, smells, lighting
- Easily startled
- Avoid thinking about the person who died
- Inability to experience joy (Anhedonia)
- Scattered and foggy mind (Polyphasic)

JUST IMAGINE...

A family is going along with their regular daily life — school, work, after school extra-curriculars, homework, dinner. Regular routines. A predictable, stable life. Regular routines. A predictable, stable life. Then one evening while Mom and the other kids are out, ten year old Jan finds her dad on the floor in the kitchen. He had been out for a bike ride and arrived back a little while ago. His glass of apple juice spills. He calls 911. The EMS arrive and perform CPR. Lots of medical equipment, people, and noise. The scene causes Jan to feel panic, chaos, and dread. Jan's Dad is confirmed dead. After her dad's death, Jan feels numb. She can't concentrate and the moments before and after his death are a blur, like a broken puzzle. Over the following months Jan feels anxious all the time. She has moments when she suddenly begins to shake, her hands get sweaty, her heart starts pounding, for no apparent reason. She develops extreme fear that she and her other family members are going to die. She jumps in fright when a bicycle passes by. The smell of apple juice makes her feel sick. She keeps thinking that dad must walk through the door any minute. Jan is experiencing trauma symptoms. The death of her dad has given her such a shock that her mind is having difficulty making sense of what has happened. Her brain and body have gone into protective mode, sometimes referred to as fight or flight.

What is Trauma? Should I be Concerned for My Child?

Should I Be Concerned That My Child Is Traumatized?

At Lighthouse, we see many parents/caregivers who are concerned for the emotional and mental well-being of their child. The question "has my child been traumatized by the death?" isn't a simple one to answer. We can reasonably assume that all deaths of a parent or sibling are potentially traumatic for children and youth, given that these deaths happen out of the natural order and/or prematurely in the child or youth's life. It is a combination of factors that cause trauma in a person, and there are factors which can also help prevent the traumatic reaction.

Some factors that may increase trauma include:

- Prior traumatic experiences
- Our unique personality and resilience (how we tend to react to difficult situations)
- Sudden, unexpected nature of the death event
- The sudden, unexpected nature of the death

Some factors that are believed to prevent or lessen trauma reaction:

- A naturally highly resilient personality
- Good preparation to anticipate the timing of the death
- Getting good support after a shocking event
- How well the parent is coping (especially for younger children)

In situations where a child is experiencing trauma, it is important to provide care for the trauma so that the child can feel more safe and begin to engage in their grieving process.

So how can parents support their child or youth who has been traumatized?

For families who have experienced a traumatic death, it is important that as the parent/caregiver, that you get support for yourself as soon as possible. Your well-being can have a direct impact on how your child comes through the trauma, especially for younger children. For children and youth, we can tend to minimize or deny their traumatic experience because it can be difficult to know how to help them, or because we think that trying to put the event 'in the past and forget', will be better. However, this may actually make the situation worse for them, as they likely will already be confused by their own thoughts and physical reactions. It can be harmful to press a person to talk about the details of the death before they are ready, as it can take them directly back into re-experiencing the death.

A person's brain may not be ready to handle the stress of recollection. It is usually best to take a cue from the child/youth about discussing the death, especially in the early days and weeks. It is important to note that it's also not healthy for the person to avoid thinking about and processing the death and trauma indefinitely. For children/youth, extreme avoidance of the trauma in the long term has been shown to result in a delay in progressing developmentally, or getting 'stuck'.

Trauma Treatment is a Multi-Pronged Approach

In the months and years following a potentially traumatic death, helping a child to work through the trauma should involve a holistic approach focusing on the child/youth's mind, body, and spirit.

The following are key approaches...

Psychological First Aid (PFA)

This approach is increasingly used immediately after the trauma event and focuses on offering:

- Protecting from further harm
- Opportunity to talk without pressure
- Active listening
- Compassion
- Addressing and acknowledging concerns
- Discussing coping strategies
- Social support
- Offer to return to talk
- Referral

Psycho-education

Psycho-education involves helping the child/youth to understand the reasons for the mental and physical reactions they experience, including physiological responses (racing heart, sweaty palms, shortness of breath for no apparent reason). Once the child/youth understands that there are logical reasons for their reactions, this helps normalize and reduce their anxiety, and other thoughts and reactions. For example, at Lighthouse a group of children who had experienced sudden losses described episodes of sudden unexpected shaking. Learning that the others had the same experience and reason for their reaction helped the children to make sense of the situation.

What Exactly is Trauma, and should I be concerned for my child or teen?

Supportive Care

It is important for the child who has experienced a trauma to receive tender loving care. Trauma is an assault on the body and mind, a major emotional wound that also lowers the immune system. For children/youth, care includes rest, good nutrition, and being surrounded by comforting, trusted family members and friends. It's important for children/youth to keep engaged and invested in activities that provide immediate gratification and joy. For children, play is not only an important distraction, but it's also a way that they process and problem solve their thoughts and feelings, including those related to the trauma. For youth, time with friends allows for relief and distraction from the painful aspects of the trauma. If sleep issues don't lessen it is important to get help.

Calming Strategies

Understanding the cause of one's thoughts, emotions, and body/nervous system reactions from trauma, is a crucial first step in order to regain a sense of control. Also vital, is learning and practicing ways to calm the mind and body, especially once the child begins to explore fear-inducing memories of the death. Selfcalming may include breathing exercises, self-talk, mind calming mantras, physical relaxation (muscle tensing and relaxing), and distraction activities (ie. doodling, games, exercise).

Affective Expression

Traumatic death can elicit a wide range of feelings. For children, it can be difficult to identify the individual feelings. Some children are reluctant to express the emotions out of fear of becoming overwhelmed. Helping the child/youth to name the individual feelings they experience since the death can help them think about the events that bring on the feelings and connect them to their trauma. For upsetting feelings (such as fear, anger, panic) it's important to help the child/youth come up with ways to express themselves so they don't feel helpless and out of control.

Remembering and Telling the story of the death

When a child has experienced trauma, it's important to piece together the story of the death, also known as the trauma narrative.

What is critical, is gradual exposure allowing the child/youth to tell bits of the story in their own time and without pressure. When ready, re-telling the aspects of the story of the death allows them to

add in forgotten parts and this helps their brain to put the pieces in an order so that they can come to understand what happened.

At Lighthouse, 12-year-old 'Anna' could only say at first that her dad had died suddenly, and that she remembered him being removed from the home. Over the following months, Anna slowly added a few more details to the story and was eventually able and eager to share a lot of detail about her dad's suicide. Drawing the story allows for children to express themselves visually, and can help them to gradually fill in the details. Each time the child recalls the death while using self-calming strategies, the overwhelming emotions and fear tend to become more manageable.

Positive Self-Talk and Building Self-Esteem

For children/youth who have experienced trauma, it can become difficult to see good in the world, or in themselves. While it is important never to minimize the child/youth's experience of trauma, it is also important to reaffirm their strengths, areas of resilience, and help them see that there is good in the world. Actively praising the child and ignoring increased minor negative behaviours that tend to occur after trauma, can help restore their selfesteem.

Active ignoring does not apply when a child is being aggressive or doing something dangerous.

So What Does All This Mean?

Trauma is complicated. Physiological trauma symptoms can feel really distressing. Not every child or adult will experience trauma after a death, however if they do, it is important to not ignore the symptoms, to give care and comfort, and to seek help. It is possible to heal the effects of the trauma, so that the person can grieve their loss, feel safe in the world, and experience joy again.

THERE IS HOPE FOR HEALING AFTER TRAUMA

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