

Trauma and Your Family

What is trauma?

A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event that can happen to any or all members of a family. Some types of trauma that families go through are:

- Accidents or injuries
- Serious illness
- House fires
- Crimes
- Community violence
- School violence
- Sudden loss of a loved one
- Combat injuries or death of a family member
- Violence within the family
- Abuse
- Neglect
- Homelessness
- Natural disasters
- Acts of terrorism
- Living in or escaping from a war zone

What is traumatic stress?

Everyone gets stressed out once in a while. At any time, a member of any family may worry about staying safe or getting very sick. But when “bad things happen,” such as a trauma event, some family members may become very upset and show signs of traumatic stress. They may:

- Feel numb or shock
- Avoid people and places that remind them of the event
- Have nightmares or strong memories of the event, as if re-living it
- Be very afraid, angry, or sad
- Have trouble sleeping or paying attention
- Feel helpless and hopeless
- Be very tired and worn out
- Have aches and pains

*“Sitting around worrying about what happened makes it worse.”
A mother who experienced domestic violence*

How common is trauma?

Unfortunately, trauma events happen pretty often. Some families have more than one trauma event. Others do not. When there is trauma, at first people feel more shocked, upset, and unable to cope. When families have many traumas, they can find it hard to support each other or meet the needs of the children.

How does trauma impact the family?

Trauma can affect every member of the family. Each family goes through trauma differently. Some family members may get closer to each other and find comfort in wise words of family elders. Some families may not do as well as they did before. Some families might feel more alone or be in shock or believe no one will be there for them. Others may end up cutting ties with members who hurt them.

“When my children hurt, I hurt.”

A mother whose children were beaten at school

Can my family get over traumatic stress?

Yes. When families are safe and can care for and support each other, they often can overcome the fears and stress of trauma. Some families grow stronger after a trauma event and even are able to help others in need. Of the many ways to cope and heal from traumatic stress, many families count on:

- Community support
- Spiritual beliefs
- Friends and other families

For families having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting their children’s needs, trauma treatment is available to help your family seek safety, grow stronger, and heal.

“You can’t change the past, but you can do something with the present and prepare for the future. This is what really kept me going.”

A grandmother raising grandchildren who were abused

Things families can do to cope with traumatic stress

It is natural to want to “put the past behind you” and not to think or talk about the bad things that happened. While each person in the family may behave differently, families can manage fear and stress and feel safer when they spend time together talking about their feelings, return to everyday routines, respect family rules, and honor family traditions.

Some families get better with time and the support of others, while other families may need help from trauma treatments. When seeking help, your family can:

- Talk to a doctor, school counselor, or spiritual leader about the family’s trauma event
- Find a mental health provider who has helped families overcome traumatic stress
- Look for trauma treatments that help all members of the family:
 - Feel safe
 - Learn about trauma and its effects
 - Cope with difficulties caused by the trauma
 - Recognize and build on the family’s strengths
 - Talk about ways to get the family back on track

“It helps to talk about it versus keeping it bottled up.”

A father who witnessed domestic violence as a child

Go to nctsn.org to learn more about how to help your family grow stronger.