



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Common reactions to traumatic events

**Information for families during
a child's hospital admission**



Reactions following a traumatic event

It is common for people to experience a strong emotional response after witnessing, or being involved in, a distressing event. This may happen straightaway, or could be weeks later. People can respond very differently to the same, often sudden or unexpected, event. While responses are all personal, it may be helpful for you to know how others have reacted in similar circumstances.

There are a number of feelings that you may experience. Some examples include:

- difficulty sleeping
- feeling 'jumpy' or easily agitated
- nightmares
- feeling angry or worried.

These feelings, and some strategies to help cope with them, are covered in more detail in the leaflet entitled 'What to expect after trauma.'

It is normal to experience these things, and it is important to hold in mind that everyone reacts and responds differently. For many people, these symptoms decrease with time, however if they continue being a problem, if they worsen or interfere with day-to-day activities, then seek further support from your GP.

How do children react?

Like adults, children may react to a traumatic event in a variety of ways.

Younger children may:

- be more clingy to parents/carers
- have temper tantrums/emotional outbursts
- do things they had grown out of e.g. bed-wetting, thumb-sucking
- have nightmares/difficulty sleeping
- not want to go to school or play with friends

Older children /adolescents may:

- want to be alone or be with you all of the time
- be easily overwhelmed or 'jumpy'
- be more sensitive /quiet
- have nightmares/difficulty sleeping
- have school-related difficulties e.g. with concentration or behaviour

What helps?

- 1.** Talk as a family about how the situation is impacting everyone and encourage your children to share how they are feeling if they want to. It is OK if they do not want to talk about what has happened.
- 2.** Keep things as normal as is possible, do everyday activities and give siblings activities to enjoy and look forward to. Encourage them to have fun and remind them that it is OK for them to do things they enjoy.
- 3.** Sometimes schoolwork can be affected, so make your child's school aware of the situation and what has happened.
- 4.** It can be hard to maintain the usual parental boundaries during a difficult time, but keeping the normal boundaries wherever possible can be helpful.
- 5.** Help your other children understand what is happening and address any misunderstandings they may have. Ask questions to find out what your child knows and give an explanation that is appropriate for their age. The Psychologist working within the team can help with this.
- 6.** Spend time with your children – try to make plans for some 1:1 time with your other children if possible. If you are staying at the hospital, phone calls, messages or online video calls can be useful.
- 7.** If appropriate, allow children to be part of their sibling's care.

Where to get further support

We would expect any symptoms that you or your family members are experiencing to gradually reduce over time, but if they continue for several weeks with no sign of improvement, you or your child may need further support.

If you are becoming increasingly withdrawn from other people or social situations, if your work is suffering, relationships are affected, or if there is no one you can talk to about how you are feeling, contact your GP to arrange further support.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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