

Clinical Psychological Service Branch(CPSB)

The CPSB of the Social Welfare Department(SWD) provides early psychological intervention, consultation, psychological assessment and treatment to people who have experienced critical incidents.

People seeking services from the CPSB would be referred through the Integrated Family Service Centres of the SWD.

SWD hotline: 2343 2255

SWD Website: <http://www.info.gov.hk/swd>

Integrated Family Service Centres

Clinical Psychology Service Branch



Helping children
cope with
traumatic events



What is child traumatic stress?

Both children and adults are susceptible to stress reactions after encountering or witnessing a traumatic incident that threatens their physical and psychological well-being (e.g. natural disaster, traffic accident, and domestic violence).

In view of their limited capacity in cognition, emotional expression and verbal abilities, stress reactions of children may manifest more readily in behavioural or limitation in physical aspects.

If parents/care-takers can understand and recognise these characteristics and limitations in children, it would help them better cope with the challenging time and facilitate their recovery.

Post-traumatic stress reactions in children

Parents/care-givers may look out for the following changes with reference to children's usual behaviors. These can be warning signs that children are in need of assistance:



- Nightmares or other sleep disturbances
- Regressive behaviours, e.g. bed-wetting, fear of darkness and being alone



- Mood fluctuations or irritability, or even self-harm or aggressions towards others



- Loss of appetite



- Being jumpy and anxious
- Fear of separation, becoming particularly dependent on care-taker
- Becoming quiet, withdrawn, and isolated



- Avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic experience
- Fear of changes in life

Building a sense of security

Traumatic experience often damages children's sense of security and children have their cognitions, emotional expressions and useful abilities, they are more likely to express stress reactions in their behaviors or physical health. Therefore, our first step is to restore their sense of safety by providing a predictable and stable daily life. For example:

- Maintain a regular routine, sleep/wake schedule, with stable care-givers. If changes are inevitable, let children know in advance and allow time for adjustment.
- If they appear dependent or resistant to separation, parents/care-givers should spend more time with them, giving them more attention.
- If they appear worried, parents/care-givers should show acceptance and understanding, and try to comfort them. For younger children, physical contact such as hugging can be considered.

Let children express their feelings

Children are often too fearful to express themselves or unable to use the right words to articulate their negative feelings (e.g. fear, sadness, guilt and confusion). At times, their behaviours may appear unusual. We can observe their reactions carefully, be attentive to their needs, and give appropriate guidance. For example:

- Reassure children that it is usual to have negative feelings.
- Encourage them to express their emotions in ways they like or have learnt. We can also encourage them to have a rest.
- If children express their emotions through problem behaviours, guide them to use appropriate ways of expression. For instance, "I know that you feel angry. This is understandable. Yet, it is no good hurting yourself or others. You can tell me how you feel or draw it out. You may also choose to take a break."

Let children talk about their experience

- The process of reconstructing and understanding the traumatic experience could facilitate children to make sense of the reactions and emotions they have experienced.
- Provide accurate and objective information. Encourage them to ask questions and clarify misconception related to the traumatic experience.
- Facilitate children in retelling and reorganising the event by using different tools based on their needs; such as stories, games and toys.

Self-care of parents/care-takers

- Parents / Care-givers' attitudes, coping methods, and emotional expression towards the traumatic event will directly affect how children view and cope with the event.
- Parents/care-givers should remain calm and manage their own emotions. Seek help from someone that you trust or professionals if necessary.

Seek assistance

- Different children may react differently to trauma. Adaptive coping strategies, family companion and support will facilitate the recovery process of children. The strategies they learnt to cope with adversity could even become part of their growth experience.
- General stress reactions usually subside gradually when usual life routine is resumed. Seek professional assistance if the condition persists or worsens, affecting children's daily functioning significantly.

How to help children recover from traumatic experiences?