



Emotional Injury and Recovery Following Trauma



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What is an emotional injury?

About 4 out of every 100 children under the age of 18 are exposed to some form of trauma. This can lead to emotional injury. An emotional injury may occur after someone has experienced a difficult life change such as: serious illness or traumatic injury, natural disasters or witnessing a death. The symptoms of emotional injury most often start within the first three months following the trauma. Symptoms can also start months or years later. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, girls are more likely to be diagnosed with emotional injury following a trauma.



An emotional injury can occur at any age, including childhood. People who have an emotional injury may also have:

- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Anxiety

The amount of time people experience the symptoms of emotional injury is different. Some people recover within six months, others have symptoms that last much longer.



How is emotional injury after trauma diagnosed?

Not every child or teenager who lives through a trauma gets an emotional injury.

An emotional injury is diagnosed if symptoms:

- Follow a traumatic event
- Have a negative effect on the child's life
- Change the way they behave, act and learn

What are the common signs and symptoms of emotional injury following trauma?

Signs and symptoms of emotional injury after trauma are different based on the child and their age.

Children aged 5 and under may:

- Show signs of fear
- Cling to parent or caregiver
- Cry or scream
- Whimper or tremble
- Move aimlessly
- Become immobile
- Return to behaviors common to being younger

- Suck their thumb
- Wet the bed
- Be afraid of the dark

Children aged 6 to 11 may:

- Isolate themselves
- Become quiet around friends, family and teachers
- Have nightmares or other sleep problems
- Refuse to go to bed
- Become irritable or disruptive
- Have outbursts of anger
- Start fights
- Be unable to concentrate
- Refuse to go to school
- Complain of physical problems (like headaches, stomachaches, chest pains)
- Develop fears for no reason
- Become depressed
- Express guilt over what happened
- Feel numb emotionally (seem to have no feeling about the event)
- Do poorly with school and homework
- Lose interest in fun activities

Adolescents aged 12 to 17 may:

- Have flashbacks to the event (flashbacks are the mind reliving the event)
- Have nightmares or other sleep problems

- Avoid reminders of the event
- Use or abuse drugs, alcohol or tobacco
- Be disruptive
- Be disrespectful
- Behave destructively
- Complain of physical problems (like headaches, stomachaches, chest pains)
- Feel isolated or confused
- Be depressed
- Be angry
- Try to hurt themselves
- Lose interest in fun activities
- Have suicidal thoughts
- Feel guilty, they may feel guilt for not preventing injury or deaths
- Have thoughts of revenge

Please remember: *These symptoms may happen during stressful times at any point in a child's life. These symptoms can appear even if a child didn't experience a traumatic event, and they should still be assessed professionally.*

Is it common for a child with emotional injury to have flashbacks or feel like they are going through the trauma all over again?

Children and adolescents with emotional injury following trauma go through extreme emotional, mental and physical worry when exposed to places and things that remind them of the traumatic event. Some may often relive the trauma in the form of nightmares, scary thoughts and disturbing memories during the day.

How is an emotional injury treated?

Emotional injury following a trauma can be treated. It is important to watch for symptoms and treat them as early as possible. This can:

- Reduce the symptoms
- Enhance your child's normal growth and development
- Improve your child's quality of life
- Decrease future problems

If your child keeps experiencing stress symptoms for a month or more after the trauma, it is important to talk over the symptoms with your child's regular doctor and get your child help.



A child psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional usually diagnoses emotional trauma in children or adolescents following a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation.

What can I as a parent do to help my child?

Parents play a vital supportive role in any treatment process. Children exposed to the same trauma may react very differently, even if they are in the same family. If your child keeps experiencing stress symptoms for a month or more after the trauma, it is important to seek professional help.

If concerned, please talk over the symptoms with your child's regular doctor. Your child's doctor can help you get in touch with a child psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional.

As a parent or family member, you should:

- Be sure to take care of yourself. You may also be experiencing symptoms of emotional injury following your child's trauma, if so seek your own medical attention from your doctor.
- Explain to children what happened and let them know:
 - You love them
 - The event was not their fault
 - You will do your best to take care of them
 - It's okay for them to feel upset

Do:

- Allow children to cry
- Allow sadness
- Let children talk about feelings
- Let them write about feelings
- Let them draw pictures about the event or their feelings

Don't:

- Expect children to be brave or tough
- Make children discuss the event before they are ready
- Get angry if children show strong emotions
- Get upset if they begin bedwetting, acting out or thumb sucking

Local resources

- Your child's pediatrician
- Stanford Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics – dbp.stanfordchildrens.org
- Stanford Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – psych.stanfordchildrens.org
- Kaiser Permanente – kp.org
- Sutter Health – sutterhealth.org

References

- After the Injury – aftertheinjury.org
- National Center for PTSD – www.ptsd.va.gov
- The National Institute of Mental Health – nimh.nih.gov
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network – nctsn.org

