

Even in the closest of families, it is sometimes hard to remember that family members may have different reactions to the same traumatic event. Reactions will differ depending on each family member's age, developmental level, trauma history, as well as his or her relationship with the child, and personal exposure to the event. For example, one family member may have shared the child's experience, another may have witnessed it, and another may have heard about it after the fact. While all family members may be upset, only some will have traumatic stress reactions and each will take a different amount of time to recover from the experience.

“I was so focused on my own worries that I almost didn't notice how upset my son was. But once I did, finding activities to help calm him ended up calming me as well.”

How does trauma affect families?

Trauma changes families as they work to survive and adapt to their circumstances and environment. Research demonstrates that trauma has a range of impacts on individual family members, their relationships with each other, and overall family functioning.

Individuals can experience a range of reactions to a traumatic event. Initial distress is likely. Subsequent responses range from resilience to thriving, or on the other end of the spectrum, short-term to chronic physical health concerns (e.g. headaches, sleep problems, digestion problems, high blood pressure) or mental health problems (e.g. acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression). In both children and adults, these symptoms can inhibit developmental growth and cascade into changing the course of one's life.

The adult intimate relationships in a family can be a source of strength in coping with a traumatic experience and its aftermath, but when coping resources are stretched too thin and the stress is too high, partners can have problems communicating, managing emotions, and remaining close, which increases the chances for separation or even interpersonal violence.

How does trauma affect family relationships?

The parent-child relationship is vital to the child's development and recovery. Parents' protection, nurturance, and guidance speeds recovery and supports their children's coping in the face of trauma. When parents are not available or are struggling with their own reactions or behavioral and/or physical health problems, they may have trouble staying attuned with their children's reactions and responses to the traumatic experience, leading to changes in parenting behaviors.

Sibling relationships are important sources of companionship, comfort, daily support, and family connection, especially when living under stressful conditions or impacted by trauma. When the stress and burden of such changes are too heavy, sibling relationships can become over-taxed and typical developmental rivalries can turn into more intense conflict or feelings of rejection.

Extended family and kinship relationships can offer the day-to-day assistance as well as the emotional support needed to recover from trauma. Families separated from their extended kin often develop a new “kinship” network close to where they are.

The family, as a whole, provides resources to meet the basic needs of each of its member (safety, love, food, shelter, health, education, etc.) and supports the family’s well-being and day-to-day functioning. Traumatic circumstances often drain families of resources, such as time, money, and energy, interfering with growing, learning, and working. The burdens often associated with trauma (e.g. costly court proceedings, moving to a new home, changing schools, etc.) result in cascading effects such as loss of income, as well as the time to spend with family and friends. When trauma limits access to needed resources and social support, families have difficulty carrying out daily routines and sustaining important traditions that bind them together.

How can providers support families after trauma?

Growing awareness of trauma’s impact on families—including the important roles families play in helping children recover—highlights the importance of putting families at the center of trauma services. When families carry out routines, rituals, and traditions, they strengthen their connections and grow stronger together. Talking, laughing, sharing memories and feelings, as well as working together to solve problems, manage stress, and plan for each day and the future are necessary for resilience and recovery from traumatic stress. If families experience numerous or ongoing traumas, resources diminish and the “wear-and-tear” effect on health and well-being may call for family-informed trauma services in addition to resources for recovery and ongoing healing. Providers who actively engage primary, biological, extended, kinship, birth, and foster families and work with professionals in other child- and family-serving systems are better partners in the delivery of family-centered, trauma-informed services.

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