

POST-INJURY MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT TO EXPECT

It is not unusual for children to feel distressed following a trauma. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress are very normal after a scary event.

THESE SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- Unwanted and upsetting memories of the traumatic event
- Feeling scared or upset when reminded of the event
- Nightmares (about the traumatic event or general)
- Avoiding reminders of the trauma
- Feeling sad/upset
- Jumper or more on edge than usual
- More irritable and/or more aggressive than usual
- Difficulty sleeping
- Emotional withdrawal or appearing 'zoned out'

These symptoms can affect how your child behaves and feels. Symptoms can also vary depending on their age.

YOUNGER CHILDREN

- Be more clingy than before
- Wet the bed
- Act younger than they did before
- Talk less than before or not talk at all
- Act out what happened in play

OLDER CHILDREN

- Have problems sleeping
- Have problems eating
- Have trouble concentrating
- Complain of headaches, a sore stomach, or other minor illnesses
- Not wanting to do things they did before

Your child may behave in some of the ways described, but it is very likely they will return to normal without professional help.

Recovery can take up to six months, but the main thing is that you are seeing some improvement and their symptoms are not getting worse. If your child is not back to their usual self or their symptoms are getting worse after a **month**, they may need professional help.

POST-INJURY MENTAL HEALTH: HOW TO HELP

ACCEPTANCE, PATIENCE AND SAFETY

- Remind your child that it is okay to be upset
- Remind your child that they are safe and that the trauma is over
- Difficult feelings or behaviours (e.g., anxiety, anger, tantrums, feeling down) are normal, but they should go away naturally with empathy, support, and patience

ENCOURAGING HEALTHY COPING

- **Anxiety:** try some simple relaxation or breathing techniques to calm down (e.g., 'box breathing')
- **Nightmares:** comfort your child and try drawing the nightmare and 'putting it away' into a box
- **Anger/tantrums:** help them to calm down, tell them you understand how they are feeling, and try to talk about why they felt that way

RETURNING TO NORMAL ROUTINES

- Returning to normal routines is really helpful in establishing a safe and predictable space
- Gradually return to normal in small, manageable steps
- Work with your child to face fears in a safe, gradual, and manageable way
- Reward your child for taking steps and facing their fears

TALKING IS HEALTHY

- Talking about what has happened and any difficult feelings is helpful to make sense of memories and feelings
- Let your child know that they can talk to you
- Encourage conversation through open questions
- Keep the conversation at their pace
- Respect their feelings

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- You may be feeling a sense of guilt or may be having unhelpful thoughts of your own
- Taking care of your own distress can help you be emotionally available for your child
- Try to notice any unhelpful thoughts or beliefs, and try to rationalise them
- Talking to others and seeking support yourself can help keep your cup from overflowing