

Trauma: What it is and how to help someone who has experienced it

Trauma

Trauma is the emotional, mental, and physical effects someone experiences *after* a traumatic experience. Traumatic experiences are events that involve actual or perceived threats to one's safety and wellbeing, and have **three common elements**:

- It was unexpected
- The person was unprepared to handle the situation; they did not have the appropriate coping skills
- There was nothing they could do to stop it from happening; it was outside of their control

Traumatic events can include things such as bullying, emotional or physical neglect, war, immigration, discrimination, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Each person will experience a traumatic event differently depending on their age, previous experiences, supportive relationships and environments (or lack thereof), severity of the event, and other variables.

Traumatic events can change the way someone sees the world and can have a serious impact on a child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

How Can Trauma Affect a Child/ Youth?

Not every child is impacted by trauma in the same way. **Some common signs of can be:**

Physically: Unexplained chronic pain or numbness, headaches, sleep problems, breathing problems, digestive problem

Mentally: Memory deficits, loss of time, lack of problem solving skills, difficulty making decisions, decreased concentration, easily distracted, learning difficulties

Emotionally: Irritability, anger and resentment, hopelessness & helplessness, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, feeling out of control, emotional numbness, tuning out/ dissociating

Spiritually: Loss of meaning/faith, loss of connection, feelings of shame/guilt, self-blame and self-hate, feeling like a bad person

Socially: Not feeling that adults are reliable protectors, not knowing who is dangerous and who is safe, frequent conflict in relationships, difficulty

setting boundaries, difficulty establishing and maintaining close relationships

What Can Caregivers do to Help?

The starting point for any parent/caregiver with a child/youth experiencing trauma is to help them develop coping skills and increase feelings of safety by strengthening the relationship.

Not all of the following strategies will work for everyone and it may take time to find the right ones for you. Additionally, **seeking out a mental health professional is often necessary** – there is no shame in needing help after a traumatic event.

General Strategies

- **Create consistency and reliability** – Chaos and unpredictability can feel normal for those living with trauma. Providing regular, predictable routines can create safety.
- **Allow decision making** - Children/Youth dealing with trauma often feel a loss of control over their life. Giving them the power to make choices, when appropriate, can help build resilience.
- **Anticipate difficulties and triggers** – If there is something we know is upsetting we can work to mitigate it in advance. We can also develop coping strategies with our child/youth *before* they actually have to encounter specific triggers.
- **Help children and youth learn** self-soothing, self-compassion, problem solving skills, social skills, emotional intelligence, and conflict management.

Self-Regulation Techniques

Children who have experienced trauma may have difficulty understanding and regulating emotions. We can help this by:

- **teaching breathing and meditation techniques**
- **encouraging time spent outside**
- **developing calming corners**
- **identifying therapeutic activities** such as creating art, playing music, doing yoga, or something else that feels right for them.

Strengthening Relationships

Every relationship is unique and you may find specific tools that work for your child/youth. Here are some general ideas to follow:

- Maintain a consistent approach to communication that stems from unconditional love and caring. This means that even when their behavior is challenging we want our child/youth to know we still love them. Even when having to set boundaries and limits our child/youth should still know that our love is unwavering, not dependent on *what they do* but instead rooted in *who they are*.
- Acknowledge and validate feelings.
- Invite connection - start conversations and ask questions.
- Actively listen.
- When arguments arise don't ignore them. Apologize when appropriate and model what repairing a relationship looks like.

Resources

- Centre for the Developing Child, Harvard University
developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/
- Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Adverse Childhood Experiences
cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/
- Child Trauma Academy childtrauma.org/
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
NCTSN.org
- Zebra Child Protection Centre: zebracentre.ca
- Call Health Link Alberta: 811
- CYFAMH Intake: 780-342-2701
- Youth Addiction Services Edmonton: 780-422-7383
- Mental Health Crisis Team for Children and Youth: 780-407-1000
- Call 211 – Alberta Community resources
- CMHA Edmonton Distress Line: 780-482-HELP (4357)
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Video Resource

- A Brain's Journey to Resilience – AFWI
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJvDrT6N-mw>