

# Understanding trauma: A teen's perspective

13 to 18 years

## Traumatic events

A traumatic event is an unexpected event or accident, such as car accidents, falls, animal attacks, burns, or sporting accidents. This event often leads to a physical injury.

- Physical injuries may be minor and temporary or severe and long-term.
- Traumatic events may also cause emotional and mental reactions for teens.

## Common reactions

It is common for teens to feel angry, nervous, upset, confused, or unsure, after experiencing a traumatic event. Other common reactions and behaviors include:

### Behavior

- Teen has changes in behavior or mood.
- Has trouble focusing at school or finishing tasks like homework.
- Starts having problems with friends or family.
- Engages in risky behaviors such as driving fast, using drugs, or using alcohol.

### Feelings

- Feels guilty or responsible for the trauma, accident, or injury.
- Withdraws and doesn't want to talk about what happened or about how they feel.

### Fear

Teen is afraid to do something related to the trauma. For example nervous about being in the car after a car accident.

### Physical

- Feels physically sick with headaches or stomachaches.
- Has trouble sleeping or nightmares.

### Triggers

Certain places, situations, sights, sounds, or smells will trigger a memory of the trauma.

## First take care of you

It is very important to become aware of your own feelings and reactions to the traumatic event before helping your teen.

Keep in mind that different people respond to trauma in different ways, especially teens. You

will need to be calm, patient, positive, reassuring, and understanding.

## Helping your teen after a traumatic event

### Respect and privacy

Be available to your teen, but respect their need for privacy. Give your teen opportunities for open and honest discussions, but allow them to have private time.

### Listen

Allow your teen to talk about their thoughts and feelings. They will talk when they are ready.

- Listen to what your teen is thinking and feeling.
- Reassure your teen that these feelings and worries are very important.
- Sometimes it's easier for teenagers to express their feelings using methods such as art, music, writing, or journaling.

### Rules and routines

Keep rules, routines, and schedules the same as before the trauma. Make sure your teen is:

- Getting enough sleep.
- Eating healthy and regularly.
- Going to school (as much as the injury allows).

### Family and friends

Schedule more time with family and friends. After experiencing a trauma, your teen needs this extra support from trusted family and friends. Encourage your teen to share thoughts and feelings with trusted adults and friends.

And don't forget your teens' brothers and sisters. They'll need your support and reassurance, too. Siblings are often scared, upset, and confused about the trauma, even if they were not directly involved.

## Where and when to get help

Your teen may need extra help if they are:

- Still very nervous a few weeks after the trauma.
- Not doing things they use to enjoy.
- Often feeling depressed.
- Not wanting to go to school.
- Having difficulty in school.
- Engaging in risky behaviors such as driving fast or using drugs or alcohol.

Please reach out to your doctor or call a mental health counselor if you are concerned about your teenager's behaviors or emotions.

## Child Life helps teens cope

Child Life specialists help teens cope with traumatic events by using activities and age-appropriate words. This helps teens understand stress and trauma.

If you would like to see a Child Life specialist or would like help coping with this traumatic event:

Email [Traumasupport@cookchildrens.org](mailto:Traumasupport@cookchildrens.org)

Or visit: [www.cookchildrens.org/medical-center/fort-worth/family-support/child-life/](http://www.cookchildrens.org/medical-center/fort-worth/family-support/child-life/)

or scan the code below with your phone.



You can also ask to speak to a child life specialist at your next clinic appointment.

## Other resources

### Books

Digging Deep: A Journal for Young People Facing Health Challenges by Rose Offner, MFA and Sheri Brisson, MA

### Online

After the Injury: <https://www.aftertheinjury.org>

<https://www.aftertheinjury.org/tools-parents-help-their-children-and-themselves-recover-injury>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org>

### For caregivers

<https://www.nctsn.org/audiences/families-and-caregivers>

### For teens

<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/what-do-i-say-talking-about-what-happened.pdf>

These instructions are only general guidelines. Your healthcare provider may give you special instructions. If you have questions or concerns, please call your healthcare provider.