

What is trauma?

Any event that involves exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence has the potential to be traumatic. Almost everyone who experiences trauma will be emotionally affected, but not everyone will respond in the same way. Most people will recover within the first week or two with the help of family and friends. For some, the effects can be long lasting. Traumatic events can include:

- experiencing a serious accident, a physical assault, war, a natural disaster, sexual assault or abuse
- witnessing these events happening to another person
- learning that a friend or family member died suddenly (e.g., as a result of an assault or an accident), was involved in a life threatening event, or was seriously injured.

Traumatic events are common

Most people will go through at least one traumatic event in their lives. In Australia, the most common traumatic events are:

- having someone close to you die unexpectedly
- seeing someone badly injured or killed, or unexpectedly seeing a dead body
- being in a life threatening car accident.

Traumatic events cover a broad range of experiences. Some, like a car accident, are one-off, sudden and unexpected events. Other traumatic events, such as childhood sexual abuse, can happen repeatedly over a long period of time. Both types of traumatic events cause emotional distress for most people and can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Traumatic events are often overwhelming. This can make it hard for people who have been through a traumatic event to think through and come to terms with what has happened. The experience is likely to be very different from anything they have gone through before. It can be hard to make sense of what happened, and sometimes it makes people doubt things that they've always believed. For instance, after a traumatic event a person might no longer believe that the world is a safe place, that people are generally good, or that they are in control of what happens to them. When people talk about their world being shattered after a traumatic event, they are usually talking about these beliefs being shattered.

Other stressful events, like relationship breakdowns or the loss of a loved one through natural causes, are difficult to go through and can affect a person's mental health, but aren't thought of as being traumatic in the same way as the events described above. This is important, because the treatment that is recommended to help people recover from trauma is different from recommended approaches to mental health problems arising from other stressful life events.

Trauma and children

As with adults, children can be emotionally affected by being directly involved in a traumatic event or witnessing another person going through trauma.

Learning that someone close to them, such as a friend or family member, has died suddenly, was involved in a life-threatening event, or was seriously injured, can also be traumatic for children. For children under six years of age, this is particularly likely if that person is a parent or caregiving figure.

Around two thirds of children will experience a potentially traumatic event by the time they turn 16.

Explaining trauma to children

If your child has been through a traumatic event, it's important to discuss it with them in a way they can understand. The following tips may be helpful:

- Let them know that trauma is common and that it's OK to be upset, e.g., *"Sometimes things happen that are really scary, and you keep feeling afraid for a long time afterwards"*.
- Let them know that the event was not their fault, e.g., *"Things like [the traumatic event] can happen to anyone; it wasn't your fault"*.
- Provide reassurance, e.g., *"The important thing to remember is that you're safe now"*. *"Any time you feel scared or upset about what happened, I'm here to help"*.
- Encourage them to talk openly about how they have been feeling, and try to get an idea about any worries they may have or difficulties they are experiencing, e.g., *"Is there anything about [the traumatic event] that you're especially worried about?"*