

## When your child has psychological trauma

Your child has shown signs that they may be working through a trauma. This document will help you learn more about what this means and what you can do to help.

### What is psychological trauma?

It's when someone goes through an event that causes them to have high levels of fear and distress. The event makes them feel out of control, unsafe, scared, and overwhelmed. This may cause emotional and behavioral changes, even after the event has passed.

### What types of events cause it?

Some things that are known to cause trauma include:

- natural disasters
- accidents
- family or community violence
- the death of someone you know
- illness
- injury
- unexpected hospital stays.

Even if they aren't the ones hurt, children can be affected by events that happen to someone around them. For example, it may be traumatic for a child to visit a loved one in the ICU, or see life-saving measures like CPR being done to someone.

### How do people react to it?

People react to trauma in different ways. They may:

- say they think about it all the time and can't get it out of their mind
- say they don't think about it at all
- feel more tired or less tired
- start sleeping more or less
- have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- have changes in their appetite or energy level
- feel more emotional or irritable than usual.

These different responses are all normal after a trauma.

### What are the signs of it in children?

Children can show different signs of trauma depending on their age and development. These are some of the things you might see:

#### *Infants and toddlers (birth to 2 years) may:*

- have new eating and sleeping habits
- change how they play
- seem more fussy, sad, or distressed

- have a hard time being apart from you and other caregivers
- go back to doing things a younger child might do, like refusing to walk or sucking their thumb.

### *Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) may:*

- have new eating and sleeping habits
- be more irritable or moody
- have a hard time being apart from you and other caregivers
- keep talking about the trauma or telling stories about it
- go back to doing things a younger child might do, like wetting the bed or having a new fear of the dark
- complain more often about having aches and pains in their body
- talk more often about feeling sick.

### *School Age Children (Ages 6 to 12) may:*

- have new eating and sleeping habits
- be more or less active
- have more or less energy
- have problems with remembering things or staying focused
- have problems at school, including fights or arguments with other children and trouble with their grades
- stop hanging out with their friends
- stop doing their favorite activities
- complain more often about having aches and pains in their body
- talk more often about feeling sick.

### *Teenagers (Ages 13 and up) may:*

- have new eating and sleeping habits
- be more or less active
- have more or less energy
- have trouble keeping up with their schoolwork
- stop hanging out with their friends
- stop doing their favorite activities
- take part in risky activities
- show more sadness, fear, aggression, or anger
- talk more about the trauma or spend more time denying that it happened
- complain more often about having aches and pains in their body
- talk more often about feeling sick.

## **How can I help my child?**

- Remind them that they're safe. At first, you may need to do this often.
- Try to get your child's environment and routines back to normal as soon as possible. Even if they're still in the hospital you can do things like bring their favorite toys, take them to the playroom, or go to special events in the hospital. Even doing regular tasks, like working on homework together, will help your child feel safe and secure.
- Surround them with safe and familiar people such as family members, school friends, teachers,

- pastors, or other supportive members of their community.
- Give them the chance to talk with you about the trauma. It can help your child make sense of what happened.
    - For some kids, it's natural to talk about their feelings. Others might find it easier to use play, art, or music.
    - We have child life specialists, music therapists, and an art therapist on staff who can help you support your child.

### *What if I'm also having a hard time?*

If you're having a hard time after the trauma, we can help you get the support you need. It will help you care for yourself. It will also help you better care for your child.

### *When I'm with my child, should I pretend everything's fine?*

No. Be honest with your child. You don't have to act like everything's fine. It's OK if your child knows you're having a hard time too. Being open about your feelings after the trauma will help your child know that it's natural for them to feel like they do. If your child knows you're getting help, it shows them it's normal and good to ask for help.

### **How long will the trauma affect my child?**

It's normal for children to show signs of trauma for a few weeks after the event has happened. Over time, these signs should start to disappear and get back to normal. If this doesn't happen, or if you see your child having more trouble, get help from a trained professional. We're happy to refer you to a professional at Vanderbilt or in your community so your child can get the care they need.

### **We're here to help**

Dealing with trauma can be very hard. When a trauma causes serious injury it can be even harder. You may be left not knowing what to expect in the future. You may worry about how you and your child will move forward. There are many people in the hospital and community who can help you and your child, including:

- child life specialists
- psychologists
- licensed counselors
- social workers.

To talk with any of these people, just ask your nurse or a member of your child's care team for help.

Any time you have questions, you can also call the Family Resource Center at (615) 936-2558.

### **Learn more**

#### **The Family Resource Center (FRC)**

This is a free service in the Children's Hospital. Things you can learn about there include:

- trauma
- different types of injuries
- childhood illnesses
- stages of childhood development and the needs children have
- mental health services located near you.

**National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network**

[NCTSNet.org](http://NCTSNet.org)

**National Institute of Mental Health**

[NIMH.NIH.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-parents/index.shtml](http://NIMH.NIH.gov/health/publications/helping-children-and-adolescents-cope-with-violence-and-disasters-parents/index.shtml)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

[Emergency.CDCgov/coping/children.asp](http://Emergency.CDCgov/coping/children.asp)

**Remember! If your child is in crisis and needs help right away, always call 911.**