

Different Reactions to Traumatic Events

Do you ever wonder what makes one child react strongly to a traumatic event where others may have very different reactions? The information below from NCTSN gives a brief overview of the protective factors that may impact a person's reaction to an event. While this is specifically written for children and their parents, these same factors play a role in how all humans react to traumatic events.

What makes it likely that my child will develop child traumatic stress after a traumatic event?

Risk factors for developing child traumatic stress include:

Severity of the Event

How serious was the event? How badly were your children or someone they love physically hurt? Did they or someone they love need to go to the hospital? Were the police involved? Were your children separated from their caregivers? Were they interviewed by a principal, police officer, or counselor? Did a friend or family member die? Typically the more serious the perception of the event, the higher risk for traumatic stress.

Amount of Destruction Seen/Distance from Trauma Event

Were your children actually at the place where the event occurred? Did they see the event happen to someone else or were they a victim? Did your child watch the event on television? Did they hear a loved one talk about what happened? Typically the closer a person is to an event, the more traumatic stress may occur.

Caregivers Reactions

Did you believe that your child was telling the truth? Did you take your child's reactions seriously? Did you respond to your child's needs? Did you do your best to protect your child and make him or her feel safe? How did you cope with the event? Being believed and supported is vital in helping a person heal from a traumatic

event. A parent's capacity to provide a supportive reaction and protection is crucial in helping the child recover from trauma.

Exposure to More than One Traumatic Event in the Past

In general, children exposed to one traumatic event are less likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. Children continually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to develop traumatic stress reactions. The more exposure to traumatic events the higher the correlation to traumatic stress responses.

Children, Family and Community

The culture, race, and ethnicity of children, their families, and their communities can be a protective factor, meaning that children and families have qualities and/or resources that help lessen or eliminate risk and protect them against long-term harm. One of these protective factors can be the child's cultural identity. Culture often has a positive impact on how children, their families, and their communities respond, recover, and heal from a traumatic experience. However, culture also can increase a child's risk for traumatic stress symptoms. In cultures where safety is fleeting, the culture may itself contribute to traumatic stress (think war areas and high crime areas). Perceived safety is the building block for healing.