

Trauma and Families: Fact Sheet for Providers

What is trauma?

Traumas are frightening, often life-threatening, or violent events that can happen to any or all members of the family. Traumas can cause traumatic stress responses in family members with consequences that ripple through family relationships and impede optimal family functioning. Families living in unsafe or *traumatic* circumstances often experience multiple traumas and have fewer resources needed for stability and recovery.

How does trauma impact the family?

All families experience trauma differently. Some factors such as the children's age or the family's culture or ethnicity may influence how the family copes and recovers. After traumatic experiences, family members often show signs of resilience. For some families, however, the stress and burden cause them to feel alone, overwhelmed, and less able to maintain vital family functions. Research demonstrates that trauma impacts all levels of the family:

- **Families** that “come together” after traumatic experiences can strengthen bonds and hasten recovery. Families dealing with high stress, limited resources, and multiple trauma exposures often find their coping resources depleted. Their efforts to plan or problem solve are not effective, resulting in ongoing crises and discord.
- **Children, adolescents, and adult family members** can experience mild, moderate, or severe posttraumatic stress symptoms. After traumatic exposure, some people grow stronger and develop a new appreciation for life. Others may struggle with continuing trauma-related problems that disrupt functioning in many areas of their lives.
- **Extended family relationships** can offer sustaining resources in the form of family rituals and traditions, emotional support, and care giving. Some families who have had significant trauma across generations may experience current problems in functioning, and they risk transmitting the effects of trauma to the next generation.
- **Parent-child relationships** have a central role in parents' and children's adjustment after trauma exposure. Protective, nurturing, and effective parental responses are positively associated with reduced symptoms in children. At the same time, parental stress, isolation, and burden can make parents less emotionally available to their children and less able to help them recover from trauma.
- **Adult intimate relationships** can be a source of strength in coping with a traumatic experience. However, many intimate partners struggle with communication and have difficulty expressing emotion or maintaining intimacy, which make them less available to each other and increases the risk of separation, conflict, or interpersonal violence.
- **Sibling relationships** that are close and supportive can offer a buffer against the negative effect of trauma, but siblings who feel disconnected or unprotected can have high conflict. Siblings not directly exposed to trauma can suffer secondary or vicarious traumatic stress; these symptoms mirror posttraumatic stress and interfere with functioning at home or school.

Safe and nurturing relationships among parents, intimate partners, siblings, and extended family members—as well as neighbors and faith-based group members—are protective and help families recover and grow. Risk factors contributing to family instability generally include prior individual or family psychiatric history, history of previous traumas or adverse childhood experiences, increasing life stressors, severity/chronicity of traumatic experiences, conflictual or violent family interactions, and social isolation. Facing significant risks, including limited resources, compromises families’ ability to adapt and to gain a sense of safety, stability, and well-being.

How can providers support families experiencing traumatic stress?

Providers aware of the impact of trauma on family relationships and functioning can help members access supports and treatments that focus on all family members and work to stabilize the whole “family unit”. Look for **family-informed trauma treatments** that:

- Promote safety for all family members and prevent exposure to further traumas
- Optimize the strengths of the family’s cultural or ethnic background, religious or spiritual affiliation, and beliefs to support recovery
- Link families to essential community resources
- Educate families on the signs of posttraumatic stress and how it can affect the family
- Include family-informed trauma assessments and evidence-based treatments that actively engage family members
- Help family members talk together about their traumatic experiences and how they were impacted

Partner with families to attain safety and access **family centered, trauma** specific services that put families in the “driver’s seat” and empower them to plot their own courses of recovery and healing in the aftermath of trauma. Family informed trauma treatments can help to build stronger families and hold promise for benefiting future generations.

“You can’t change the past, but you can do something with the present and prepare for the future. This is what really kept me going.”

A grandmother raising grandchildren who were abused

“It’s all in your heart, what you want, and what you can do. You can overcome anything.”

A mother whose child was murdered in a random act of violence

Go to nctsn.org to learn more about how to help families impacted by trauma and to check out the companion tip sheet for families: “Trauma and Your Family”

References

1. <http://fittcenter@umaryland.edu> click on “The Model” to find Trauma-Informed Principles and Family Informed Practices
2. Collins, K. et al. (2010). *Understanding the impact of trauma and urban poverty on family systems: Risks, resilience, and interventions*. Baltimore, MD: Family Informed Trauma Treatment Center. <http://fittcenter.umaryland.edu/WhitePaper.aspx>