

## Trauma in Kids & Teens

### Basics

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#### **What is trauma?**

Trauma is the psychological and emotional reaction to a very distressing situation. In addition to being traumatized by personally experiencing the incident, it is possible to experience trauma as a witness to the event, or being repeatedly exposed to the disturbing details of a situation.

We can think of trauma like a psychological bruise caused from a hit by an abnormally hard ball of stress. If we were hit on the arm by a baseball from a pitching machine, it would be very painful and leave a large bruise. That area will be extremely sensitive to the touch for quite a while and the bruise itself might take a long time to fade. Even the slightest amount of pressure on that bruise can be as painful as getting hit by the ball in the exact same spot.

Those who have this kind of psychological injury are so afraid of the bruise getting poked, even accidentally, they may unknowingly adapt new behaviors as they try to protect the bruise they have, and avoid getting another one.

#### **What kind of behaviors do we see in kids & teens?**

##### **Irritability:**

After exposure to a distressing situation, nightmares can interrupt sleep several times per night. Even weeks after the incident is in the past, sleeping can be a challenge due to residual anxiety related to the incident or fear it will happen again.

In teens especially, having “an attitude” or coming across as snarky is seen as a conscious decision to be a jerk. It usually isn’t. Tired people are grumpy people.

##### **Monsters everywhere:**

The brains of younger kids process these events differently than older kids or teens. Nightmares may appear to be unrelated to the incident, containing scary images or monsters instead of specific details of the child's experience. It is not uncommon for some kids to generalize these fears and bring them into daily activities. Some kids act-out the danger while playing, or draw monsters as a way to represent what they’re afraid of.

##### **Jumpy:**

The perceived danger may have passed, but the brain is still on high-alert. It becomes a super paranoid watch-dog scanning the environment for any sign of trouble. It barks at everything. This may mean the person is easily startled or jumpy - or they may seem always on edge and unable to relax. Snapping or verbally lashing out for no obvious reason is not uncommon.

## Trauma in Kids & Teens Basics (continued)

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### **Absent Minded:**

Intrusive thoughts or flashbacks can be triggered without notice. Flashbacks are biological time-machines that pull people back to the very moment they experienced the distress. Their brain doesn't realize the danger is over so it gets the body hyped up and back into the *fight-flight-or freeze* mode.

This mode is a natural stress response and prepares us for survival. To conserve energy and stay focused, the body shuts down the functions that aren't helpful in dangerous situations - like the ability to concentrate on math homework or follow a conversation.

### **Avoidance:**

Talking about the incident is often a trigger, so \*not\* wanting to talk about it is understandable. Staying away from places or people that may remind them of their experience is a common. Their goal is to avoid triggering flashbacks or getting that paranoid brain all riled-up.

### **Space-Invaders:**

Younger kids, usually those under 10, may cling to adults like a sloth to its favorite tree. Following a parent around, fearful of sleeping alone, or constantly checking on family members to make sure everyone in the house is safe are behaviors often seen in distressed little humans.

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If these issues go on for a month or more, or if problems with grades, social and family interactions, or withdrawal from leisure activities become evident - please seek out a licensed mental health professional experienced in the treatment of trauma.