

# Trauma, Loss and Grief

## About Trauma, Loss and Grief

**Trauma** occurs when someone has had a distressing or overwhelming experience, with intense pain, stress, fear, or helplessness. It can result from a single event or repeated experiences, e.g. injury, medical procedures, child abuse, violence, rape, torture, war, terrorism, natural disaster.

A traumatic event is one in which a person's life or safety is threatened or there is a risk of serious harm or injury. The threat may be directly to the person, or a loved one. Trauma can also occur if the person *believes* there is this level of risk, e.g. a child can be affected by things they see or hear about, but which may not be a real risk in this time and place. People can also experience trauma indirectly by seeing traumatic events, or through historical issues such as violence against previous generations. Trauma can affect individuals, groups and communities.

**Loss** refers to a situation where a person is unable to keep, have or get something they value highly or that has significant meaning to them. This may be an important object or relationship, or might relate to their security and sense of self. A person's experience of loss may depend on what was lost, its importance or value to the person, and whether the loss was due to natural causes or occurred through the actions of others, or through a traumatic event.

Trauma and loss are different types of experience. Trauma is a reaction to life threatening or overwhelming events. Loss is a response to being unable to access someone or something that is important. In some situations loss can also involve trauma, but this is not always so.

**Grief** is an experience of sadness, anguish or distress a person goes through after a loss or a traumatic experience. Grief can affect a person's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, beliefs and their relationships with others. The reaction may be immediate and short-term or it may take a while to come out and go on for a longer time. The time needed to recover from the effects of grief varies from person to person and will be affected by their personal experiences and situation.

## Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Reacting to a loss or traumatic event usually involves strong negative feelings, e.g. fear, anger, helplessness, numbness, anxiety, or sadness. These feelings may be associated with changes in the person's thoughts, behaviour and relationships. The situation may impact on their mental health and wellbeing while they are trying to come to terms with what has happened.

These reactions are common and are part of the normal process of dealing with trauma, loss and grief. The process is different for each person. With understanding and support, most people are able to resolve their feelings and make some sense of their experience over time. However if there is ongoing distress, unresolved grief, long-term stress or repeated experiences of trauma, then there can be a risk of a person developing a mental illness or disorder, such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Trauma, loss or grief in childhood can impact on the child's current wellbeing and behaviour, but may also affect their longer-term developmental outcomes and mental health. Some children may have problems with developing secure attachments and with other aspects of their social and emotional development. This may increase the risk of mental health problems in adulthood.

A child's capacity to deal positively with a traumatic experience will be affected by a wide range of factors, such as the nature of the trauma, post-trauma environment, attachment relationships, their developmental stage, temperament, culture, history and the level of support available.

## What should I look for?

Trauma and grief can cause changes in the behaviour, thoughts and physical reactions of a child or adult. With trauma, these changes are a reaction to danger, horror, helplessness or pain. When under threat, the body has a survival response that prepares it to fight, to run away, or to be still and hide. A person who has experienced a traumatic event may seem to be very watchful and may be easily startled. They often avoid situations that remind them of the event.

Many children show distress or behaviour changes when they experience a loss or a traumatic event. Children may express their feelings through their behaviour, play and drawings and this can help them to make meaning of their experiences. Adults should not underestimate a child's capacity to feel loss or grief. Children may grieve over losses that might seem small to an adult.

When experiencing the effects of trauma, loss or grief, a child may show:

- Negative feelings such as sadness, anger, anxiety, insecurity or numbness; in children, feelings of distress may appear intermittently, with periods of less distress in between.
- Changes in behaviour: lack of interest in activities, limited and repetitive play, angry or aggressive behaviour, irritability, withdrawal from others, impulsivity, difficulty sleeping.
- Physical reactions: poor health, loss of energy, fatigue, difficulty or changes in eating.

## What should I do?

Staff can support families by being reliable and available and helping the child to re-establish a sense of security. Acknowledge the situation briefly and express sympathy if appropriate when you talk with the family, but try not to take on a counselling role. Be on hand for the child throughout the day and let them express their feelings if they want to. When working with a child who has experienced trauma, loss or grief, here are some ideas to keep in mind:

- Keep to regular and familiar routines to help the child re-establish a sense of security.
- Provide a safe and supportive environment and be available to sit or play with the child.
- Acknowledge the child's feelings if he or she expresses them, e.g. in play, stories or art.
- Provide verbal and physical reassurance if children are upset, anxious, or withdrawn.
- Provide time and safe spaces where the child can be alone or sit with a trusted adult.
- Remind children of behaviour limits and boundaries if needed, praise positive behaviour.
- Maintain open and honest communication with the child's family.

A child's signs of distress or changes in behaviour will often become less severe or less frequent over several weeks. If distress or behaviour changes persist over time and you become concerned about the child's wellbeing, speak to your supervisor, coordinator or service director. They may talk with the family about other services that could offer additional support.

## Where can I find out more?

Birch, M. (2009). Children's grief: Jenny's story. *Foundations*, December 2009, 17-19. Retrieved 1 April, 2010, from: [http://www.himh.org.au/client\\_images/876483.pdf](http://www.himh.org.au/client_images/876483.pdf).

Tansey, S. (2008). Supporting children through loss and grief. Extract from NCAC Newsletter *Putting Children First*, (27), 22-25. Retrieved 1 April, 2010, from: [http://www.ncac.gov.au/pcf/Supporting\\_children\\_through\\_grief\\_and\\_loss\\_Sep08.pdf](http://www.ncac.gov.au/pcf/Supporting_children_through_grief_and_loss_Sep08.pdf).

The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (ACATLGN) website: <http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/>