A traumatic event is something which threatens a person’s life or safety, or that of the people around them. It might be a natural disaster such as a bushfire, flood or earthquake, or a serious accident, or a physical or sexual assault. Up to 65% of Australians are likely to experience a traumatic event at some stage in their lives.

Traumatic events are usually unexpected and do not allow people time to prepare for them. They are often very different to anything experienced before, and can be difficult to make sense of. They might cause people to question things that they previously thought were true, such as their safety in the world and their control over their lives. Much of the distress that follows a traumatic event can be caused by the shattering of their previous sense of security and stability. Trauma can be especially challenging for young people, who are still learning about themselves, establishing their identity, and gaining independence from their parents.

Young people respond to traumatic events in many different ways, depending on their past experiences, personality, levels of support and the nature of the event. Most young people will cope well and make a good recovery, but a few will have long-term problems.

In the period immediately after the event, however, it is normal to experience strong emotions and feelings. These can include:

- Emotional numbness – feeling cut-off from what happened
- Shock and disbelief
- Fear – for example of death or injury, being alone, not being able to cope, or the event happening again
- Helplessness – having no control
- Guilt or shame – for not having stopped the event, being better off than others, not reacting in the best way or not coping well enough
- Sadness – for things that have been lost
- Isolation – feeling that no-one understands or can help
- Euphoria – joy at being alive and safe
- Anger and frustration – about the event, and its unfairness
- Re-experiencing of the event – through dreams, flashbacks or thoughts
- Changes in relationships – some people may seem unsupportive or unavailable, others might seem closer than previously

Some young people may experience other physical and behavioural reactions, including:

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Racing heart
- Shaking, sweating
- Sleep difficulties
- Trouble concentrating
- Emotional distress, including mood swings or anxiety
- Difficulty with school or work
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Difficulties with normal daily activities
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Increased use of alcohol and other drugs

Such reactions are normal, and they usually begin to lessen in the days and weeks after the event.

How can parents and carers provide support?

Support from the family is extremely important for young people following a traumatic event. Most young people will recover well with the support of family, friends and their community, as being with familiar and caring people helps them to regain a sense of safety and re-establish normal routines. There are some things which can help your child through the process of recovery:

- Acknowledge the trauma that they have experienced – let them know that you are there for them, and are listening to them
- Provide information about common reactions to traumatic experiences and normalise their physical and emotional responses
• Encourage them to spend time with family, friends and other trusted people
• Limiting their access to media coverage of the event may be helpful – information is important, but too much can reinforce distress
• Encourage them to re-establish their normal routines

Although most young people begin to recover from a traumatic experience within weeks, some will have persisting or worsening symptoms. This can increase their risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or problems with substance use. If they do develop, then these problems can be treated, but they need proper assessment by a health professional.

Possible signs of a mental health problem include changes in behaviour or mood which:

• Persist for more than two weeks
• Worsen over time
• Affect their ability to participate in activities they enjoy, their school work, or their relationships
• Are distressing
• Lead to thoughts of harming themselves or someone else

If symptoms of trauma are left untreated, they can have a significant effect on a young person’s social, emotional, behavioural and physical development. Getting help early can reduce the likely effect of mental health problems on their life and improve the chances of a full recovery.

Supporting your child in seeking help

Supporting your child to find a health professional such as a GP or counsellor who they trust and feel comfortable with will be important. If they’ve had a positive experience with a family GP or another health professional in the past it might be helpful to encourage them to contact them again. You could also support them to contact your local community health centre or headspace centre. Psychological treatments, such as individual or group cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) have been shown to work very well with young people who have symptoms of PTSD.

For more information visit, and to find out how to get help, visit headspace.org.au