

Traumatized Children and Adolescents

Since the end of the Vietnam war, mental health professionals have identified, and begun to treat, a disorder that was eventually named post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, for short. After the symptoms of PTSD were identified, researchers learned that anyone who had endured a severe crisis, not only combat veterans, could develop the disorder.

Among the people who may develop PTSD are those who are victims of, or witnesses to, a violent crime. Murder, sexual assault, robbery or kidnapping are just some of the criminal acts that can trigger PTSD. Others who have survived or witnessed a disaster, either from natural causes such as fire or flood, or from man-made events like car or plane crashes, can demonstrate the symptoms of PTSD. Certainly adolescents and children are susceptible to PTSD as they grow into adulthood, if they are witnesses to, or victims of, various kinds of traumatic incidents.

What are the symptoms of PTSD? People who have PTSD reexperience their trauma in some way. Most often, they develop intrusive and recurrent recollections, or have extremely distressful and repeated nightmares about the experience. People suffering from PTSD develop immediate emotional distress when they are exposed to situations or conditions that resemble or symbolize their trauma in some way. An anniversary or commemoration of the event may also trigger a stressful episode. A child who survived a disastrous fire, for example, may reexperience distress when news accounts of the event are replayed.

PTSD sufferers experience persistent symptoms of increased anxiety, watchfulness or vigilance about what is happening in their surroundings. Some shooting victims, for example, have an exaggerated “startle response” when they hear a loud noise in circumstances that recall the actual event. Other people with PTSD have difficulty falling or staying asleep. Some have trouble concentrating on school or work tasks.

While adolescent reaction to trauma may be similar to that of adults, children who develop PTSD require special consideration. Many youngsters who have been sexually, physically or emotionally abused may develop the disorder. Children with PTSD may express their symptoms differently than teenagers or adults because they often have less ability to talk about their difficulty, since their verbal skills are not as developed. Don’t assume that a child can’t remember the trauma simply because he or she won’t discuss it.

Children with PTSD may lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Their former energy and enthusiasm may disappear. Some youngsters believe they have no real future and, therefore, don’t think about or plan for what they want to be when they grow up. Finally, children may develop unexplained headaches or stomachaches, as well as signs of extreme watchfulness or attentiveness. They may also cling unreasonably to a parent or loved one, show extreme fear of a particular person or place, lose a developmental skill such as toilet training, or demonstrate a lack of interest in a once-favorite toy or game. (continued)

While PTSD can pose serious problems for children and adolescents, PTSD patients often respond well to treatment. Treatment usually consists of various types of individual and family counseling, and some medications can likewise be helpful. If you decide that assistance for a PTSD sufferer is necessary, the first step is to have the child or teenager thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

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