

Helping Teens after Trauma: Tips for Caregivers

After a traumatic event, some teens struggle more than others to cope in their daily lives. Here are ways to recognize and help your teen after trauma. You will help most if you are nonjudgmental, consider your teen’s point of view, and are open to compromise.

I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT:	YOU CAN HELP ME WHEN YOU:
1. I may feel sad, scared, empty, or numb but be embarrassed to show my true feelings. Yet, I may say too much on social media.	1. Talk about your own feelings and invite me to talk about mine once I’m ready. Discuss sharing things on social media. Offer to find me a counselor if it seems easier for me to talk to someone outside the family.
2. I might have behavior problems that are new or worse than before the trauma (angry outbursts, irritability, rule breaking, revenge seeking). I may be doing serious, unsafe, or harmful behaviors (self-injury, risky sexual behavior, drug or alcohol use).	2. Have patience and try to remain calm while setting appropriate limits on behaviors. Encourage me to get back to routines and activities with friends. For serious, risky, or harmful behaviors, get professional help.
3. I have trouble concentrating and paying attention or have a change in sleep patterns, such as staying up later or sleeping in all day.	3. Realize that I may be having scary thoughts about the trauma and not tell you. Talk with me about ways to cope with these, like getting back to enjoyable activities or listening to calming music. Taking a technology break at night will help me to sleep better.
4. I might have physical reactions like stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, or body aches.	4. Recognize that I may minimize or make excuses for these reactions—or do the opposite—exaggerate a minor ailment or injury. Encourage me to use physical activities to release tension or try relaxing things, such as deep breathing or gentle stretching.
5. I may think that life is meaningless, feel guilty for being okay, or withdraw from family and friends—yet retreat to social media or gaming.	5. Discuss solutions for feeling sad and mention that, while social media can be helpful, I may feel better seeing friends in person. Check with other adults I may confide in to discuss ways to support me. If I seem very sad or guilty, seek professional help.
6. Sometimes I wonder if another event will happen. That school, home or the community is not safe. I may express this by appearing anxious or worried or seeming not to care about the future (not studying, skipping school), or risk-taking behavior.	6. Help me develop a realistic picture of the dangers in life. Talk about ways to take control of my safety and future (e.g. driving carefully, eating well and exercising, asking others for help). Help me return to normal routines such as school, doing homework and chores, as soon as possible. If I can’t do this, seek professional help.
7. I might talk about feeling responsible for the traumatic event or for not doing something different, during or after it to prevent or minimize the consequences.	7. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information to me. I get information from all kinds of media, so let me know you will always tell me the truth. If I feel responsible, reassure me to not worry; that I did the best I could at the time.
8. Sometimes I think that the world is a terrible place, that no one can be trusted, or might think other negative thoughts related to what happened.	8. Help me focus on positive actions that people (e.g, peers, educators, first responders, parents, etc.) take to help and protect kids. For ongoing negative thoughts seek professional help.
9. I’m probably searching media for information about the event to find answers.	9. Monitor and limit use of media and look at it with me to help separate facts from inaccurate information. Let me know you will help find answers to difficult questions.

If any of these problems get in the way of your teen’s functioning at school or home, or continue more than 1-2 months, you should get help from a mental health professional who has experience treating children and teens with trauma.