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# Common Reactions of Children to Traumatic Incidents

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When a traumatic incident unfortunately occurs, children often find themselves suddenly thrust into a world that can be scary and uncertain. The impact of trauma is so powerful and pervasive that it can affect children in many ways, including the physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects of their daily lives. As children are the most vulnerable members of our community, it is crucial to monitor how they react to the news they have heard.

**Trauma can be likened to a stone thrown into a pond. The resulting ripples spread, hitting everything in their wake and affecting their surrounding environment.**

Numerous factors may determine the impact the news will have, including:

- Illnesses or injuries that the child, or those he/she knows, may have (or had);
- Recent losses and changes, such as death, divorce, conflicts with a friend, moving residences, changing schools;
- Age/developmental stage;
- Prior coping skills;
- Supports (parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, rabbis, teachers, mental health professionals).

## Key points about the patterns of children's reactions:

- "Roller coaster" reactions may occur, with responses coming and going without any apparent cycle or pattern. A child may have some initial reactions, start to feel better, become exceptionally relieved and then become scared or dismayed upon experiencing reactions again.
- The strength of the reactions may also become stronger or weaker without any discernable pattern.
- Reactions may vary from day to day, or week to week: crying one day, loss of appetite the next, feelings of guilt a few weeks down the line.
- Children can feel as if they have lost their bearings. They may begin to feel different and alone, questioning their own ability to weather the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

- Not everyone responds strongly to trauma. However, not experiencing the feelings that others are involved in may in turn trigger feelings of self-doubt or even guilt.
- Generally speaking, it is considered within "normal range" for a person to have strong reactions for up to 30 days. However, if you have serious concerns about your child's reactions, or lack of reactions, it is advisable to consult with a mental health professional.

**Some classic reactions include:**

**Physical**

- Headaches or stomach aches
- Fatigue
- Chest pains/breathing difficulties
- Rapid heart rate/elevated blood pressure
- Sudden bursts of energy
- Senses becoming hyper-acute
- Dizziness, fainting
- Chills, nausea, weakness

**Emotional**

- Sadness or depression
- Little/no affect ("flat affect"), shock, numbness
- Guilt or regret
- Feeling hopeless, lonely, lost, vulnerable or abandoned
- Apathy or resignation
- Anger, irritability
- Fear, anxiety, apprehension

**Cognitive**

- Difficulty concentrating, remembering
- Difficulty making decisions
- Dazed, disbelief, confusion, disorientation
- Daydreaming, fantasizing
- Nightmares
- Sudden moments of clarity or insight
- Obsessive thoughts (concerning personal life, home or school)
- Excessive safety worries (for self, parents, siblings or others)

### **Behavioral**

- Pattern changes for sleeping/eating/talking (significant increase or decrease)
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Sudden outbursts (screaming, crying)
- Declining grades at school
- Shirking from physical contact
- Regressive behaviors (clinginess, whining, thumb-sucking, soiling clothes, bedwetting, sleeping in parents' bed or with lights on at night)

## **Chai4ever - Helping children and families cope with parental illness or loss.**

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**At Chai4ever, we help families and children dealing with parental illness or loss, providing expert practical and emotional support during their challenging times.**

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