

Understanding Trauma and Stress in Families

What is Trauma?

A trauma is a scary, dangerous, or violent event that can happen to any or all members of a family. Some families have more than one traumatic event or live in ongoing, traumatic circumstances.



Some types of traumatic events that families may experience are:

- Accidents, injuries, or serious illness
- Family loss, sudden death, or grief
- Abuse, neglect, or violence within the home
- Community violence, school violence, or crime
- Racism, discrimination, or other social stressors
- Homelessness or displacement, including war zones and combat injuries
- Natural disasters, fires, or acts of terrorism

What is Traumatic Stress?

Everyone experiences stress at times. Traumatic stress happens when families face unsafe or overwhelming situations, which can affect their stability and health. When “bad things happen,” family members may show signs of traumatic stress that make daily life more challenging.

Symptoms can include:

- Feeling numb, detached, or overwhelmed by fear, anger, or sadness
- Avoiding people, places, or triggers
- Having nightmares or vivid memories, as if re-living the event
- Having trouble sleeping, focusing, or completing tasks
- Feeling worn down, helpless, or hopeless

What is Family Resilience?

With practice and support, resilient families can overcome the effects of trauma and even thrive in harsh circumstances. Resilience grows over time, and it builds when strong relationships, routines, and resources are in place.

Resilience often means “bouncing forward” — making new accommodations — rather than returning to how things were before. Each family experiences trauma differently, and factors like children’s ages or cultural background shapes how a family copes and recovers. Resilient families share common strengths:

- Creating routines that help everyone know what to expect
- Building ways to feel and stay safe
- Sharing family stories and listening to one another
- Practicing meaningful rituals and traditions and creating ones as needed
- Solving problems together – naming the problem, practicing coping strategies, and seeking help
- Reflecting on lessons learned from coming through traumatic experiences



Getting Support After Trauma

Talk with your primary care provider and seek services that promote the well-being of the whole family.

Family-informed trauma services put families in the “driver’s seat,” empowering them to guide their own recovery and healing. Safe, nurturing relationships among family members, neighbors, and community or faith groups, help protect and support families as they recover.

These services support families by:

- Promoting safety for all family members and preventing exposure to further traumas.
- Building on the family’s cultural, spiritual, and community strengths.
- Helping families recognize the signs of traumatic stress and how it can affect the family.
- Linking families to essential community resources.
- Creating space for family members to talk together about their experiences and how they have been affected.

Family-informed services focus on growth and resilience, not just symptoms. Providers use clear language, honor spiritual beliefs, and recognize the many ways families and communities recover. Over time, families develop survival skills, cope with stress, and support each other across generations.

Families’ stories help with healing. When children and caregivers can talk about what happened, they can:

- “Name it to tame it.”
- Master difficult feelings.
- Make meaning of difficult situations.
- Builds hope for the future.

For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood



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Healthy New Families is a program of the Mental Health Association of Maryland. We promote mental health and well-being for new parents, infants and young children, and families across Maryland by connecting families and providers with resources, education, and support.

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