

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY: OVERVIEW FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

WHAT IS TRAUMA AND HOW COMMON IS IT?

Trauma is any experience that leaves a lasting impact because we don't have the appropriate resources (practically or emotionally) to respond to it effectively. Most people experience some form of trauma at some point in their lives. There are many different types of trauma, such as losing someone you care about, witnessing violence, experiencing prejudice, or being excluded from a peer or social group. We measure trauma not by the severity of the event, but by the way the person experiencing it thinks and feels. Something like moving homes - that might seem like no big deal to one person, could have devastating consequences for another. Many children will have found the pandemic and self-isolation difficult, and this will impact them all in different ways.

HOW ARE YOUTH IMPACTED BY DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES?

The way trauma impacts youth can be quite extreme. The reason for this is because the childhood brain has no perspective. When something hard happens, they have no way of contextualizing it or understanding it. Their survival instinct kicks in to try to keep them safe by looking for what might have caused this difficult experience, and because their perspective is so limited, their minds generally settle on the idea that THEY must be the problem. This is why no matter how irrational it is, most kids unconsciously or consciously think that what happens to them is their fault. This is why trauma is so devastating - It's not the event that causes lasting problems, it is the fact that the childhood mind internalizes the experience and can't put it into perspective. Their mind becomes fixated on the event and it repeats over and over again in their minds. This clouds their judgment and acts like a lens over everything they experience and every interaction they have. For example, many children are currently nervous about being around people, or are spending lots of time on their devices as a result of the stress of self-isolation and the pandemic. These are examples of ways that their minds are trying to cope with and understand their own feelings of fear, loss, and loneliness.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY CHILD IS STRUGGLING?

If you see your child acting in ways that hurt themselves – like hanging around people who are being cruel to them, disengaging from friends and family, becoming more worried than usual, or physically harming themselves, this is signaling that they have been through something hard. At the same time, if you see your child hurting others – like bullying or leaving people out, this is also a sign that they are struggling with their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD OVERCOME ADVERSITY:

- Help your child understand that what they have been through is NOT their fault
- Encourage open sharing about difficult experiences in your home
- Establish a daily or a weekly check-in where each person in the family shares one struggle and one joy in their day
- Help your child tell the story of their difficult experience, focussing on how they got PAST it and reminding them of their own resourcefulness and strength
- If your child is acting up, focus on their EMOTION not their ACTIONS (eg. "I noticed you being unkind, I wonder what you're feeling that would make you act that way?")