

All families experience trauma differently. Some factors such as a child's age or the family's culture or ethnicity may influence how the family copes and recovers from a traumatic event. Trauma changes families as they work to survive and adapt to their circumstances and environment. While this adjustment may be smooth for some, for others the stress and burden cause them to feel alone, overwhelmed, and less able to maintain vital family functions. Traumas are frightening, often life-threatening, or violent events that can happen to any or all members of a family. Traumas can cause traumatic stress responses in family members with consequences that ripple through family relationships and impede optimal family functioning.

How does trauma affect families?

Trauma changes families as they work to survive and adapt to their circumstances and environment. Research demonstrates that trauma has a range of impacts on individual family members, their relationships with each other, and overall family functioning.

Individuals can experience a range of reactions to a traumatic event. Initial distress is likely. Subsequent responses range from resilience to thriving, or on the other end of the spectrum, short-term to chronic physical health concerns (e.g. headaches, sleep problems, digestion problems, high blood pressure) or mental health problems (e.g. acute stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression). In both children and adults, these symptoms can inhibit developmental growth and cascade into changing the course of one's life.

The adult intimate relationships in a family can be a source of strength in coping with a traumatic experience and its aftermath, but when coping resources are stretched too thin and the stress is too high, partners can have problems communicating, managing emotions, and remaining close, which increases the chances for separation or even interpersonal violence.

How does trauma affect family relationships?

The parent-child relationship is vital to the child's development and recovery. Parents' protection, nurturance, and guidance speeds recovery and supports their children's coping in the face of trauma. When parents are not available or are struggling with their own reactions or behavioral and/or physical health problems, they may have trouble staying attuned with their children's reactions and responses to the traumatic experience, leading to changes in parenting behaviors.

Sibling relationships are important sources of companionship, comfort, daily support, and family connection, especially when living under stressful conditions or impacted by trauma. When the stress and burden of such changes are too heavy, sibling relationships can become over-taxed and typical developmental rivalries can turn into more intense conflict or feelings of rejection.

Extended family and kinship relationships can offer the day-to-day assistance as well as the emotional support needed to recover from trauma. Families separated from their extended kin often develop a new "kinship" network close to where they are.

The family, as a whole, provides resources to meet the basic needs of each of its member (safety, love, food, shelter, health, education, etc.) and supports the family's well-being and day-to-day functioning. Traumatic circumstances often drain families of resources, such as time, money, and energy, interfering with growing, learning, and working. The burdens often associated with trauma (e.g. costly court proceedings, moving to a new home, changing schools, etc.) result in cascading effects such as loss of income, as well as the time to spend with family and friends. When trauma limits access to needed resources and social support, families have difficulty carrying out daily routines and sustaining important traditions that bind them together.