

# GETTING HELP AFTER TRAUMA: IS MY FAMILY READY?

Traumas are scary, dangerous or violent experiences that can happen to children and adults and can impact your family on a day-to-day basis. Each family member may react differently to traumatic experiences. Talking to friends and loved ones is helpful. But sometimes, families need more resources and support to move forward. That is when it may be a good idea to seek counseling.

Here are some quotes from parents and caregivers who got trauma counseling for their families:

- “I really didn’t think counseling could help our family but it helped us open up to each other and now we have more fun, even though we have been through hard times together.”
- “We thought the kids wouldn’t talk but once they got used to the counseling meetings, we realized we were the ones that were having the harder time being open. Pretty soon, we caught up with them.”
- “I was worried that my family blamed me for what happened. It turned out we were all blaming ourselves and needed a chance to admit that to each other. The counselor helped us do that.”
- “I thought I had to be strong for my whole family and tried to hide how sad and scared I was. When we discussed this in counseling, I found out that my family wanted me to take more time for myself so I could feel better. That helped a lot.”

Here are some steps to consider when deciding if you and your family are ready to start counseling to move forward on your healing journey.

## Step 1

The items below are common examples of responses people have when thinking about what might happen in trauma counseling with their families. Circle any that apply to either you or your family members:

Not wanting to show strong feelings like anger or sadness	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Worrying about safety	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Thinking it was your/their fault	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Feeling relieved to be talking about it together	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Thinking nothing will ever change	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Feeling grateful for family and friends	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Thinking that talking about it will make it happen again	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Worrying that your family will be separated	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Not wanting to talk or think about it at all	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Feeling blamed or blaming others for what happened	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER

Worrying someone will get in trouble	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Thinking there must be steps you can take to make a difference	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Worrying someone's feelings will get hurt	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Feeling embarrassed	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER
Feeling grateful for your faith	YOU	FAMILY MEMBER

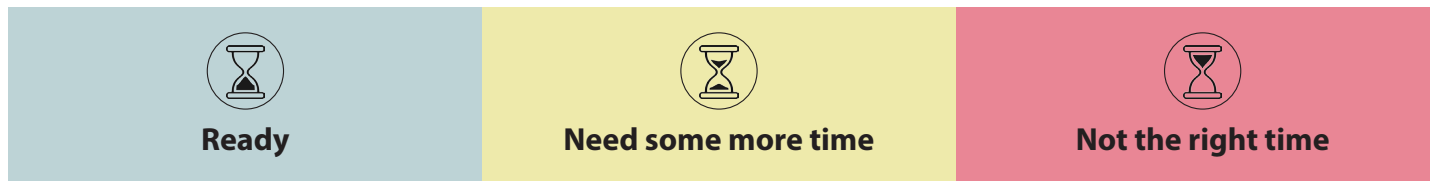
## Step 2

Your family might find these questions useful to consider what it would be like to meet with a counselor.

- » What good might come from talking about our experiences?
- » What could we do to get ready to talk about what happened?
- » What can we do to take care of ourselves if things get upsetting or uncomfortable when we are talking with a counselor?
- » Are there things we could look forward to if we started meeting with a counselor?

## Step 3

Now that you have gotten through this worksheet and talked with your family, circle the picture that best represents how ready you feel. Then circle the picture that best represents how ready your family feels.



## When seeking help, find the right fit for your family

We hope going through these steps helped you think about how ready you and your family are to deal with trauma experiences in counseling.

If you decide to move ahead, the attached document has a list of questions to ask counselors to see if they will be a good fit for your family. It's important to find someone who focuses on the whole family, builds on your family's strengths and works with you to set your own goals and priorities. This "family-informed" approach helps individuals and the whole family to heal and move forward.

### About us

The **Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (FITT)** Center at the University of Maryland partners with families, providers and local and national networks to increase behavioral health equity for children and families who have experienced chronic trauma and stress. <http://fittcenter.umaryland.edu>

The **National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)** was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children's Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events. <http://nctsn.org>

The Center for Resilient Families (CRF), part of the **Institute for Translational Research in Children's Mental Health (ITR)** at the University of Minnesota, aims to bring evidence-based parenting practices into practice for parents across the country, and raise awareness about the importance of parenting. <http://crf.umn.edu>

## Resources for Parents and Caregivers

Welcome

Understanding Trauma

Parents Can Help

Trauma Treatment

Resources

### Recovery



#### When Should I Ask for Help from a Mental Health Provider?

There is no correct timetable for recovery. Some children/teens will recover quickly. Other children recover more slowly. Some families get better with time and the support of others. For families having ongoing distress, crises, or trouble meeting their children's needs, trauma treatment from a mental health provider (i.e., psychotherapists such as psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists) is available to help your family seek safety, grow stronger, and recover. Not getting help can have long-lasting consequences but, fortunately, entering treatment can have concrete beneficial results.

**"You can't change the past, but you can do something with the present and prepare for the future. This is what really kept me going."**

- Quote from a mother of two

### Getting Help

#### What kind of mental health provider do we need?

Many families first discuss their concerns with a family physician, school counselor, or clergy member, who may refer them to a specialist such as a child or adolescent psychiatrist or psychologist. Ask your pediatrician, family physician, school counselor, or clergy member for a referral to a mental health professional. Today, many family practitioners work with a team of providers, including mental health providers, and can refer you to someone they know and trust. Ask close family members and friends for their recommendations, especially if their child or adolescent has had a good experience with psychotherapy.

When seeking help for your child, you will want to try to find a mental health provider who meets these requirements:

- Has experience in helping families overcome traumatic stress
- Offers services near your home or is easy for you to get to
- Uses evidence-based practices (EBP), that is, treatments proven to help all members of the family:
  - Feel safe
  - Learn about trauma and its effects
  - Cope with difficulties caused by the trauma
  - Recognize and build on the family and family members' strengths
  - Talk about ways to get the family back on track

#### How do I choose a therapist or counselor who's right for my family?

There are many types of mental health providers, including psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, and licensed counselors. Psychiatrists can prescribe medications because they are physicians. Mental health professionals who are not physicians can provide therapy and often work with psychiatrists and family physicians to ensure that their patients can receive any needed medications. Psychologists are skilled in evaluation and in various forms of intelligence, personality, and psychological testing. What's important is that you select a provider with appropriate training and qualifications. Once you have the name or names of several mental health professionals in your area, call and interview them over the phone to determine which is the best match for you and your family.

#### What can my family expect from therapy?

There are many approaches to outpatient psychotherapy, which may occur in individual, group, or family sessions. Treatment for your child may involve the following:

- Talking with your child or having him or her draw or play with toys in order to get a better understanding of what he or she is experiencing, feeling, or thinking
- Asking about your child's experience of the traumatic event, and other areas in his or her life, such as how the child is getting along with family, friends, teachers, and other students in school
- Assessing your child's strengths, skills, and talents, as well as problems
- Engaging with your child (while taking into account age and emotional maturity) to try to understand the traumatic experience, including the ways it has affected daily life
- Teaching a variety of evidence-based treatment techniques such as relaxation methods and problem-solving skills, and including, in some cases, interventions with the school and family or referral for medication

The goal of treatment is to help your child to address feelings of helplessness and worries over safety and to identify helpful thoughts and actions. Because trauma can interrupt a child's normal development, therapy helps in reducing the symptoms of child traumatic stress, as well as offering your child support and guidance to return to age-appropriate activities. Your child's therapist will probably ask for your participation and cooperation, because these are extremely important to the recovery of your children and the well-being of your family.

Many effective treatments include cognitive behavioral principles:

- Education about the impact of trauma
- Helping children and their parents establish or reestablish a sense of safety
- Techniques for dealing with overwhelming emotional reactions
- An opportunity to talk about the traumatic experience in a safe, accepting environment

- Involvement, when possible, of primary caregivers in the healing process

## Evidence-Based Practices

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### What Are Evidence-Based Practices (EBP)?

Not all treatments will help your child. Researchers constantly evaluate treatments to find the ones that work best. Providers who use treatments based on scientific research are using what is called "evidence-based practices." EBPs have been proven to work.

Because not all treatments work for everyone, we recommend you read the following sections of our National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) website that discuss the treatments and options that we have found most effective: trauma-focused treatment and evidence-based treatment.

NCTSN webpage: [Treatments That Work](#)

Here you will learn about trauma-focused and evidence-based practices (EBP) for children, teens, and families experiencing traumatic stress.

NCTSN webpage: [National Child Traumatic Stress Network Empirically Supported Treatments and Promising Practices](#)

Here you will find fact sheets that describe the treatments and trauma-informed approaches that our NCTSN centers use and recommend. All have the goal of reducing the effects of traumatic events on children and adolescents.

NCTSN webpage: [The Promise of Trauma-focused Therapy for Childhood Sexual Abuse \(2007\)](#)

Here you will find information about the effects of child sexual abuse, the important role parents/caretakers play in treatment, and the need for children to learn specific skills to cope with what has happened to them.

NCTSN webpage: [Questions and Answers About Child Sexual Abuse Treatment \(2007\) \(PDF\)](#)

Here you can read a Q&A with sexual abuse expert Judith A. Cohen, MD, medical director of the Center for Traumatic Stress in Children & Adolescents at Allegheny General Hospital and NCTSN member.

## Finding Help

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### Tips for Finding Help

This is an easily printable one-page sheet of NCTSN recommendations on seeking help.

### Get Help Now

If you think your children's reaction to a traumatic event is interfering with his or her daily life and you need immediate help, please see the NCTSN "About Us" page at <http://www.nctsn.org/about-us/about-this-web-site>.

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