Recognizing Traumatic Stress in Adolescents
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Traumatic events are a reality in our lives and the lives of adolescents. At least 40% of all American children will experience at least one traumatizing event by the age of 18 years. Traumatic events may involve natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, community and school violence such as 9-11 or the shooting at Columbine High School, or individual trauma such as accidents, assault, and abuse. We may agree these are all traumatizing events; however, we are all individuals, and each of us respond differently to such events based on our unique experiences, triggers, coping mechanisms, and support systems.

Psychological trauma is an individual’s response to an unexpected event, experienced intimately and forcefully. This experience overwhelms one’s normal coping abilities, causing stress, and resulting in increased feelings of danger, anxiety, and fear. Trauma affects adolescents holistically, permeating and negatively affecting all areas of development, including their physical, mental, emotional, and social development.

If your child has experienced a traumatic event, you will want to be on the look out for certain behaviors. There are characteristic posttraumatic behaviors which are noticeable in the play and activities of adolescents who have been traumatized. These behaviors may look like “normal” adolescent behaviors. However, the intensity of these behaviors is greater than those normally seen in adolescents who have not been traumatized. The play and actions of adolescents who have experienced trauma are often more intense, having a compulsive, driven nature. Examples of intense behaviors may include continually drawing pictures, talking, or blogging about the event. Activities they once found enjoyable, are no longer pleasurable, nor do they relieve stress. These activities hold a specific meaning for the adolescent and have an unconscious link between the activity and the trauma. There is also a compulsion to play out the same activity in the same way each time. A traumatized adolescent often abruptly changes, or disrupts their activity and speech as a means to protect themselves when the subject becomes too painful. They also may avoid others, including loved ones and close friends, preferring to be by themselves. Finally, these adolescents often have a flat affect, meaning they do not visibly express emotions, or the emotions they do express do not match what they are saying or doing.

None of the above behaviors should be used solely to determine traumatization of an adolescent, nor must all of them be present to indicate traumatization. However, if you notice any of these behaviors, particularly following a known traumatizing event, the adolescent may benefit from visiting with a mental health professional. School- or community-based counselors, social workers, or psychologists are specially trained to help adolescents to overcome traumatic stress.

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