

### MY CHILD'S INJURY

#### COMMON EXPERIENCES IN PARENTS FOLLOWING THEIR CHILD'S PHYSICAL TRAUMA

Dr Jennifer Dainty works as a Clinical Psychologist within a large children's hospital in the UK. One of her main roles within the trauma service is to support families when a child is in hospital following a traumatic event. She has kindly provided the following advice to parents whose child has been seriously injured.

"As part of my clinical psychology qualification, I conducted a piece of research exploring the impact of a child's physical trauma on parents' psychological well-being. I conducted this study as I feel it is vital for clinicians to understand families' experiences of traumatic events in order for us to optimise the support we can provide both in and out of hospital.

The outcomes of the research highlighted that there is often a significant impact on parents' psychological well-being following trauma to their child, including low mood and post-traumatic stress symptoms such as flashbacks, heightened anxiety and sleeplessness. Most parents described experiencing a number of these symptoms when their child was in hospital, which continued for a period of time following discharge. When I interviewed parents, all parents in the study described feeling a level of guilt and responsibility, which can understandably be extremely distressing for parents. Mothers, fathers and step-parents all tended to cope in their own ways and each parent described often coping differently to their partners, which could sometimes cause conflict. At other times, parents felt closer to each other as a result of this shared, though distressing experience. Importantly, it was highlighted that all parents coped in different ways, though there were many common experiences regarding psychological impacts.

During the interviews, most parents felt that their feelings of anxiety and low mood, as well as other symptoms of post-traumatic stress were gradually lessening as time went on. Support from families, friends and communities was highlighted as an important factor in coping. Children's resilience was also felt to be helpful for parents when trying to cope with their own difficult feelings.

Throughout this research and from my clinical experience, it is apparent that there can be an enormous impact on parents' psychological well-being following a child's traumatic event and this is certainly not unusual. Events such as this are understandably difficult for parents to manage and if you are in this situation, it is important to know that the psychological repercussions that you may be experiencing are likely to be normal responses to an unexpected situation. Symptoms tend to reduce over time however some people find it helpful to access counselling or psychological therapy to help them to process the event when symptoms are not felt to be reducing. As human beings, we often try to block out unwanted or distressing thoughts and memories, though by doing this we are not allowing our brain to process our experiences.

# AfterTrauma

Accepting support from friends and family is something that a lot of people can initially find difficult to do but parents often tell me that this has been very beneficial once they've felt able to do this. Using the support of people around you to talk through your experience can help you to process this traumatic event and in time, may help with some of the difficult emotions that are associated with these experiences.

There is information available on this site regarding [post-traumatic stress](#) and other psychological difficulties following trauma that it may be helpful to read more about. If you feel that you may be experiencing post-traumatic stress or other psychological difficulties which are impacting on your life, you may benefit from accessing psychological support which your GP can refer you for. It is important to remember that what you're experiencing is normal; we often just need to give ourselves some time and space to acknowledge what we have been through to enable us to re-focus on the here and now. "

Dr Jennifer Dainty  
Clinical Psychologist  
Alder Hey Children's Hospital