



Stressful Experiences: How to Help Your Child Heal

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Going through something stressful—losing (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Grieving-Whats-Normal-When-to-Worry.aspx) a loved one, being bullied or even the wear and tear of constant small stressors—can affect a child for years in sometimes unexpected ways. The good news is that your child can heal and grow through these stressful experiences without long-term effects on health. And in the process of helping them do this, you may build a closer relationship with them.



Starting the healing process

After an extremely stressful experience, children may feel that they are "broken." They may feel that something is wrong with them, or that they are just "bad." It can be helpful to remind your child:

1. They did nothing to deserve what happened to them.
2. They are having normal reactions to an abnormal experience.
3. The experience may have hurt them, but healing is possible.

Healing tools & strategies for you and your child

Supportive relationships

Safe, supportive, nurturing relationships can make all the difference for a child who is struggling through something stressful. Try these relationship-building activities with your child:

- When possible, reassure your child that they are safe. You can do this with words, but also with hugs, high-fives and with practical supports like a tent in their room or a "cozy corner."
- Take 15 minutes without cell phones to follow their lead in an activity of their choice.
- Share activities such as walks, cooking (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cooking-With-Your-Children.aspx), dancing and playing (/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/4-ways-play-can-help-boost-your-childs-mood.aspx) silly games.
- Tell your child what you love (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/14-Ways-to-Show-Your-Child-Love.aspx) about them.
- Listen intently to what they are saying.
- Build routines such as reading a bedtime story (/English/healthy-living/oral-health/Pages/Brush-Book-Bed.aspx) or having dinner together every night.



Connect with friends, relatives, neighbors and community-based services (<https://www.211.org/>).

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- Engage with a therapist (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/mental-health-resources/>) or other supports (<https://www.findhelp.org/>): art therapy (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9856881/>), individual play therapy (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8812369/>), parent-child interaction therapy (<https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/258/show>) and child-parent psychotherapy (<https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/312/show>).

Quality sleep

Worries may keep us awake, cause nightmares or restless sleep, and younger kids may start wetting the bed (</English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Regression.aspx>) again. When children are stressed, they may need more flexible bedtime routines and more help falling asleep, such as:

- Comforting items and relaxing routines
 - A night light
 - Relaxing smells (</English/health-issues/conditions/treatments/Pages/Aromatherapy.aspx>)
 - Favorite toys
 - Traditional tools such as Guatemalan worry dolls
 - A weighted blanket (only if child is over 12 months (</English/ages-stages/baby/sleep/Pages/a-parents-guide-to-safe-sleep.aspx>) of age)
 - Music
 - Mindfulness practices
 - Reading (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/Pages/10-Tips-to-Help-Your-Child-Fall-in-Love-with-Reading.aspx>)
 - Journaling
- For children experiencing separation anxiety at night (common after stressful or traumatic events), consider providing reassurance that you are still present and give concrete reminders such as:
 - Love notes stuck around the bedside
 - Pieces of clothing that smell like you
 - For some children, consider staying in their room while they fall asleep or even letting them sleep with you for a short period of time as they process the stressful experience.

Use light to your advantage

During the day, especially early on, get direct exposure to natural sunlight. This helps regulate sleep, mood and immune function, among other systems. At night, reduce exposure to screens and artificial lights by dimming them. You can even consider blue light-blocking glasses (</English/health-issues/conditions/eyes/Pages/What-Too-Much-Screen-Time-Does-to-Your-Childs-Eyes.aspx>) to limit exposure to the blue wavelengths of light that especially wake the brain up.

Balanced, anti-inflammatory nutrition

Stress can increase inflammation in the body. Stress can also lead us to over- or under-eat or crave foods high in fat, salt and/or sugar. Knowing this can help us be kind to ourselves and our kids when they reach for the brownie and the potato chips—and how we might help.

- Make it easier to eat healthy foods like nuts, avocados, cheese and fruits.



increase the availability of vegetables (fresh or frozen!) at snacks (</English/ages-stages/toddler/nutrition/Pages/Selecting-Snacks-for-Toddlers.aspx>) and meals.

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- Skip the juice and soda and drink water ([/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Choose-Water-for-Healthy-Hydration.aspx](#)) instead.
- Reduce foods that increase inflammation such as processed food and white (simple) carbohydrates.

Physical activity

Exercise can be a powerful way of releasing extra stress energy and counteracting the stress response. Consider:

- Jumping jacks, squats or bridges
- A game of basketball
- Dancing to a favorite song
- Martial arts
- Yoga

Getting outside and enjoying nature

Time in the outdoors ([/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/playing-outside-why-its-important-for-kids.aspx](#)) can be calming, build resilience and be a source of exercise.

- Go to a park or a playground.
- Climb a tree.
- Hike a mountain or walk around the block.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness practices can help calm the stress response, improve self-regulation skills and increase self-compassion and empathy:

- Belly breathing with Elmo (<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/sesame-belly-breathe/belly-breathe-sesame-street/>), with Rosita (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq3DwzX6MUw>), or 4-7-8 breathing (<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/4-7-8-breathing/>)
- Practicing gratitude ([/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/how-to-practice-gratitude.aspx](#))
- Meditation or focusing on each of the 5 senses while sitting still
- Free online videos (<https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-for-kids/>) and apps (<https://www.mindful.org/free-mindfulness-apps-worthy-of-your-attention/>) for kids and adults

Sensory support

Soothing, rhythmic sensory activities can help reset the way stress is stored in our nervous system and body.

Consider:

- Massage
- Music
- Movement (dancing, walking, jumping, swinging, rocking, swimming ([/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Swim-Lessons.aspx](#)))
- Occupational or physical therapy



Self-regulation and other coping skills

Child will be better able to deal with stress as they learn to manage their feelings and behavior.

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- Build in extra structure and routines. This may include developing transition plans for going from one activity to the next, for example.
- Talk about and model how to name and manage strong emotions (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Components-of-Good-Communication.aspx>), and when to seek help or take time away from a situation.

Finding purpose and meaning

This can help when we wonder "Why did this happen?" "Why me?" "Why did I survive and my friend or relative didn't?" Even young children can benefit from these activities.

Consider:

- A spiritual practice or connecting to a religious community
- Helping others through service or volunteer work
- Finding a calling or purpose, including helping fix systemic injustices
- Becoming a peer supporter

Cognitive and emotional support

Trauma and stress can impact how we think and relate to others. Some children may need extra support through:

- School 504 plans or Individualized Education Programs (</English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/Individualized-Education-Program.aspx>) (IEPs)
- Speech and language therapy
- Tutoring
- Mental health therapy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yC6m51Usvdc>)

Working on your own stress responses & modeling healing strategies

We know that a stressful time for your child is a stressful time for you, too. It is okay for you to not be okay and all these strategies and additional resources (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/mental-health-resources/>) can help you, too!

Reaching out to your child's doctor for additional support

Your pediatrician can provide more resources. For some children, medications can be an important, possibly temporary treatment for addressing certain stress-related symptoms, in combination with the above steps.

More information

- Childhood Adversity: Buffering Stress & Building Resilience (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/ACEs-Adverse-Childhood-Experiences.aspx>)
- Stress and Health: What Parents Need to Know (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/stress-and-health-what-parents-need-to-know.aspx>)
- Stressful Experiences: How to Help Your Child Heal (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/stressful-experiences-how-to-help-your-child-heal.aspx>)
- Why Kids Act Out: How to Help Your Child Cope With Stress (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/why-kids-act-out-tips-to-help-your-child-cope-with-stress.aspx>)
- Parenting After Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/adoption-and-foster-care/Pages/Parenting-Foster-Adoptive-Children-After-Trauma.aspx>)



Childhood Trauma: 3 Ways to Help Kids Cope (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Childhood-Trauma-3-Ways-to-Help-Kids-Cope.aspx>) (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/adoption-and-foster-care/Pages/Parenting-Foster-Adoptive-Children-After-Trauma.aspx>)

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About Dr. Gilgoff



Rachel Gilgoff, MD, FAAP is an integrative medicine specialist, child abuse pediatrician, researcher, science writer, and mother of two amazing kiddos. She is dedicated to improving care for stress-related health issues and promoting lifelong health and wellness.

About Dr. Bhushan



Devika Bhushan, MD, FAAP is an equity- and resilience-focused pediatrician, public health leader, parent, and Indian-American immigrant who served as California's Acting Surgeon General in 2022. She leads a community focused on resilience and well-being at askdrdevikab.substack.com (<https://askdrdevikab.substack.com/>) and [youtube.com/@drdevikab](https://www.youtube.com/@drdevikab) (<https://www.youtube.com/@drdevikab>).

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