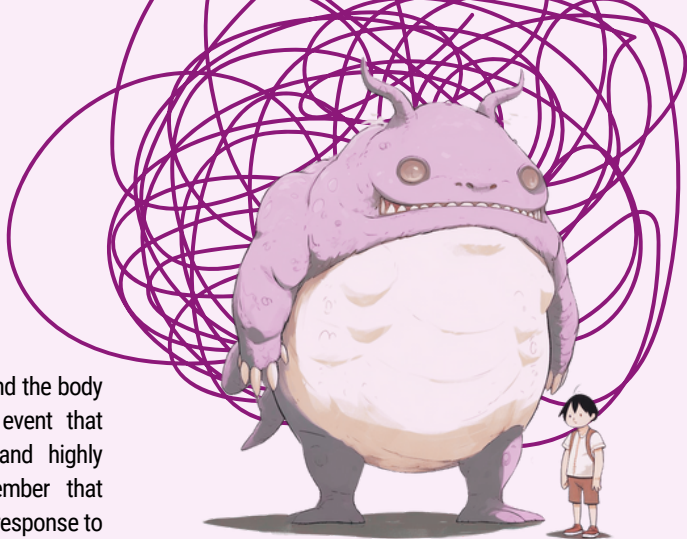


# What is trauma

Trauma is the reaction of the brain and the body to a sudden and unexpected life event that makes a person feel threatened and highly insecure. It is important to remember that trauma is **a subjective experience** in response to stressful situations such as war, natural disasters, violence, emotional neglect, racism or bullying. All these situations and feelings may be traumatizing for a person. Children and adolescents can be negatively affected by the events mentioned above when they happen to them, but they can be equally affected by traumatic situations where they are in the position of a witness. Direct participation or being a witness in such challenging situations can make children and adolescents experience high levels of stress and anxiety and can affect the quality of their daily lives.



Some children recover spontaneously in the following weeks and months, while others develop permanent problems. Trauma can negatively affect the development and structure of a child's still-developing brain, affecting cognitive, emotional and social functioning. It is therefore very important to treat trauma in children as early as possible.

A child responding to a traumatizing event may have one of the following symptoms:

- Faster heartbeat
- Excessive sweating
- Great alertness
- Agitation



These reactions are natural - the brain and body are trying to prepare the person to defend themselves from danger. If these reactions persist, they can negatively affect the child's daily life. You can read more in the chapter **How children and adolescents can respond to trauma.**

Every child is unique, so adaptation to high levels of stress can differ from child to child. These differences in adaptation are influenced by many factors, such as the child's age, physical and mental health, previous experience, biological predispositions, as well as the social and cultural context in which the child is currently situated.

The inner life of a child going through trauma processing suddenly becomes unstable and frightening. Seeing a child behave in this abnormal way can be very upsetting. But there is hope - like a physical wound, trauma heals over time. For more on what to do when a child is going through trauma, see **How to help a child during a difficult period.**

In order to help a child, we need to understand what they may be going through. A child may be experiencing the following emotions:

- **Sadness** at the loss of someone or something
- **Anger** at those who hurt their loved ones
- **Despair and loss of control** over their life
- **Fear** of loss of family members, loneliness, abandonment, danger, the future
- **Feeling guilty** for not being strong enough, good enough, obedient enough and not being able to protect their family
- **Shame** that the child has no home, is poor, does not live in good conditions



**Remember** that we adults also go through challenging situations and trauma can affect any of us. In order to take good care of the child we are responsible for, it is important not to forget our own needs (rest, relaxation). Don't be afraid to seek professional help, whether the topic of trauma concerns the child or yourself. For more information on where to find professional help, see **Where to seek help for children and adults.**

