

Infants and trauma: what do babies recall?

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The recent tragic events that unfolded in our community have led to a number of questions about the experience of infants who witness traumatic events. How much do babies remember about the bad things that happen to them? Do babies grieve the loss of loved ones? Are babies emotionally harmed when they witness violence? What can we do to help them?

Very early on, even in the first days of life, babies show evidence of what researchers call 'implicit' memories. To understand implicit memories, think of the way a song on the radio can evoke a powerful feeling, maybe a nostalgic yearning or a feeling of sadness. Implicit memories are the reason we seek out 'comfort food' to help us feel better.

Real estate agents are evoking implicit memories when they have cinnamon apple pie baking in the oven during an open house. These different sights, sounds and odours are cues or triggers that evoke feelings of good times, albeit often on an unconscious level. How does this apply to traumatic memories?

Thankfully, babies do not specifically recall traumatic

lieve that very small children will quickly forget traumatic events that have occurred in their lives.



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We tend to view infants as more resilient.

Generally infants who are otherwise well cared for but who experience a

single traumatic event, even a catastrophic one, will not likely suffer permanent emotional damage as long as they receive the comfort and nurturance of an attentive caregiver. This is reassuring news for many parents and family members who have suffered a tragedy.

Babies are capable of intense feelings of joy, sadness, grief and terror. They need the presence of a caring adult to manage these feelings in a healthy way. If parents consistently respond to their baby's distress in a loving manner, their baby will eventually learn how to handle these feelings independently.

Parents don't have to be perfect all of the time, we all have bad days. They just have to be emotionally available most of the time, especially when the baby is



events, such as witnessing the sudden loss of a loved one. It does appear though, that these memories endure and influence feelings and behaviour even when the individual is not aware of it. As an example, when my son was eight months old he received a nasty bite from a cat. He does not 'remember' getting bitten but to this day he will tell you that he does not care for cats. He avoids cats whenever he can. This is likely because cats evoke an unpleasant feeling that is not a fully formed memory. His current behaviour (avoiding cats) is influenced by an event from the past that he cannot recall.

What does all this mean for babies who witness violence or who lose someone they love? How will they remember these events and how will it affect them?

The very notion of infants experiencing trauma is a disquieting one. We do not like to think that infants grieve or despair over the loss of a loved one. We prefer to be-

hurt, lonely, ill or very upset.

Following a tragic loss, it can be difficult for caregivers to be emotionally available to their infants. All members of the family will need support. Parents should not assume that as long as their baby was not the direct target of violence that he or she is not affected and won't remember.

Infants cannot talk about their distress the way older children can. What they can do is give powerful messages such as inconsolable crying (crying that cannot be explained by colic or illness), excessive tantrums, listlessness, altered sleep patterns, feeding or digestion problems; messages that are easy to overlook or misunderstand. Parents who are concerned about their baby should seek professional advice. We need to intervene at the earliest opportunity and support all members of the family, including infants.

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