

Medical Traumatic Stress:

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Selected Books & Articles:

Children and Trauma: A Guide For Parents and Professionals

Cynthia Monahan, Jossey-Bass Publishers; San Francisco; 1997.

An informative book for parents and professionals about the impact of traumatic events on children, warning signs for ongoing problems, and ways of helping children cope with the experience.

Your Child in the Hospital: A Practical Guide for Parents

Nancy Keene, Rachel Prentice, & Linda Lamb, O'Reilly & Associates, Inc.; Cambridge, MA; 1999.

A pocket-sized guide describing what it is like for parents and children to go through a hospitalization from the point of view of those who've already been through the experience.

People like that are the only people here. (short story)

Lorrie Moore, *The New Yorker*, Jan 27, 1997; Volume 72, Number 44, Page 58 (14).

A first-person account of one family's experience of having their child diagnosed with cancer, subsequent treatment, and their interactions with the healthcare environment.

It won't hurt forever: Guiding your child through trauma.

Peter Levine, *Mothering*, January / February 2002.

Describes the experiences of children going through trauma and ways of helping them and their parents cope with their thoughts and feelings.

Childhood cancer survivorship: Posttraumatic stress can affect both children and parents.

Anne E. Kazak, *Coping*, January / February 2002.

Contains information on post-traumatic stress research and symptoms that parents and children may experience after cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Selected Internet (web) Resources:

Information for parents on traumatic stress during cancer treatment:

<http://www.pbtfus.org/InformedParent7.html>

Helping kids prepare for and cope with medical tests or procedures:

<http://www.vh.org/pediatric/patient/pediatrics/cqqa/procedure.html>

http://www.chop.edu/childlife/stress_coping.shtml

Helping brothers and sisters of an ill or injured child:

http://www.chop.edu/childlife/sibs_cando.shtml

Traumatic Stress Resources for Parents and Professionals:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.NCTSN.net>

Contact your local librarian (or the social worker from your child's hospital) for storybooks on illness and injury appropriate for your child's age and medical condition.

At the Hospital: Helping My Child Cope

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Traumatic stress symptoms are common after a serious illness, injury, or hospitalization. Even though it is your child who is ill or injured, your whole family can be affected. It's normal for you, as a parent, to feel overwhelmed or unprepared to help your child (or yourself) cope.

Traumatic stress symptoms can include:

- Being easily upset or angry
- Feeling anxious, jumpy, or confused
- Being irritable or uncooperative
- Feeling empty or numb

Things in the hospital that can be traumatic for children:

- Being left alone
- Being in pain or going through painful procedures, like shots
- Seeing an injury to their body
- Being exposed to medical equipment that looks or sounds scary
- Thinking that being in the hospital is a punishment
- Seeing other hurt or sick kids
- Being afraid of dying



The hospital can be traumatic for parents too:

Having a sick, injured, or hospitalized child often results in feelings of frustration, sadness, worry, or helplessness.

- It is a stressful time when relationships with medical staff take priority, and other important relationships and activities get interrupted or put on hold.
- Having a sick or injured child often challenges parents' innermost beliefs about the safety of their children.

Many parents and caregivers of hospitalized children tell us that:

- They worry about what will happen to their child, even though they don't always show it.
- They feel unprepared to talk with their sick or injured child (or their other children) about feelings, fears, and questions.

Special information for parents and caregivers: There are professionals at the hospital who have experience helping other parents and caregivers in your situation. If you are upset, have questions about how to help your child, or just need to talk, please seek out someone at the hospital who is available to assist you and your family — this might be a social worker, a chaplain, or another mental health professional.

Also, read the tips on the other side of this handout to help your child cope while at the hospital.

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Eight Ways You Can Help Your Child Cope While At The Hospital



- 1 You are the best person to help your child.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent hugs and praise. Hold your child's hand during tests and procedures, and distract your child with stories and pictures.
- 2 Be patient with your child.** Children's reactions can include crying, temper tantrums, whining, clinging, and acting out in frustration. These feelings and behaviors are common but temporary. If your child's behavior is becoming unmanageable, it's okay to set rules and limits like you would at home.
- 3 Help your child understand what is happening.** Use simple words that he or she can understand. If your child needs to go through a painful procedure, be honest about the fact that it may hurt but also explain its purpose is to help him or her feel better.

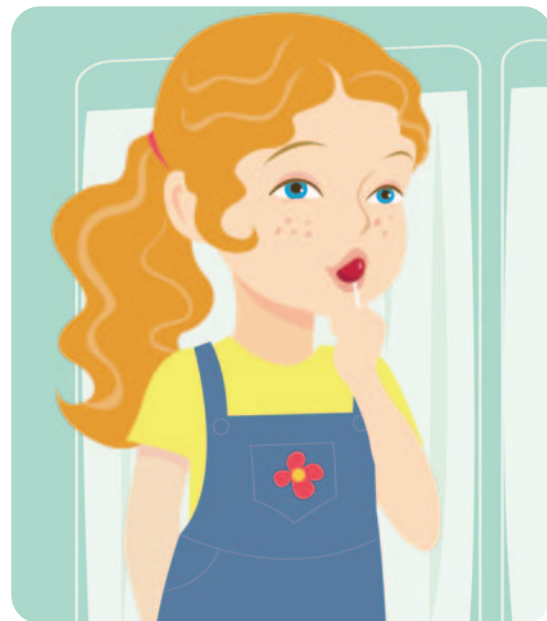
4 Allow your child to talk about worries or feelings about being in the hospital. Remind your child that it's okay to be scared or cry, but also help them talk about their feelings. Younger children are often better at expressing their feelings through play, drawing, or story-telling. Listen to your child, and help your child understand that these feelings are normal.

5 Talk about your feelings together. Children often know more than they admit, but they can easily misinterpret information or other people's feelings. Ask questions to figure out what they know and what they imagine. Reassure your child that he or she has not done anything wrong.

6 Help your child see the hospital staff as helpers. Remind your child that the staff has a lot of experience helping children feel better. Encourage your child to participate by asking his or her own questions to the doctors or nurses. It's important for you as a parent to have accurate information, so ask your own questions too.

7 Young children are often more affected by being left alone. Have a family member or familiar adult stay with your child as much as possible. Always tell your child when you are leaving, why, and when you will be back.

8 Take care of yourself. If you are worried, upset, or not getting sleep, it will be harder to help your child. Don't be afraid to ask friends or family for help. Talk about your worries with other adults, such as family, friends, a counselor, a member of the clergy, or your doctor.



Developed by the Medical Traumatic Stress Working Group of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

After the Hospital: Helping My Child Cope

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

When children are seriously ill or injured, and have to stay in the hospital, they and their families may feel upset or worried. These feelings are common and can continue after they return home. In addition, children and parents may wonder how they will cope without the support of hospital staff. Some families may also have difficulty readjusting to daily routines.

What should I expect in the days and weeks after the hospital? After being in the hospital, it is also common for some children to have minor changes in behavior. A few children and parents keep thinking about the experience and get upset frequently. Sometimes they also try to avoid places (such as the hospital) and things that remind them of it. These reactions usually get better with time, understanding, and support.

Other common (temporary) reactions after coming home from the hospital:

In younger children:

- Clinging to parents or other adults
- Bed wetting or thumb sucking
- Being afraid of the dark

In older children and teens:

- Changes in sleeping and eating
- Being easily startled or jumpy
- Complaints of headaches or bellyaches, or other minor illnesses

In parents:

- Worrying a lot more about their child being safe
- Being overprotective or “on guard,” even when there’s no need
- Getting upset at reminders of what happened, especially if their children are in pain or discomfort
- Feeling anxious about caring for their child’s medical needs on their own



Signs that your child may need extra help:

- Watching out for danger all the time
- Having new fears
- Not wanting to go to school, or doing a lot worse in school
- Not wanting to be with friends or go back to usual activities
- Arguing a lot with friends or family

When and where should I get extra help for my child? Most children and families feel better within a few days or weeks. (See **tips for parents on other side.**) Some injuries and illnesses have behavior changes associated with them, so it’s important to talk to your doctor as well. If your child’s reactions last longer, seem to get worse, or get in the way of day-to-day activities, see your doctor or a school counselor.

Eight Ways You Can Help Your Child Cope After Being in The Hospital



- 1 Go back to everyday routines.** Normal routines help children feel safe. Help your child go back to doing his/her usual activities—as much as the injury or illness allows.
- 2 Be patient and give everyone time to readjust.** Keep in mind that people in the same family can react in different ways. Brothers and sisters can feel upset too. Most family members just need time and reassurance that things are returning to normal.
- 3 Set normal limits.** You may be tempted to relax the rules in order to help your child feel special, or to make up for the hard times that he or she is experiencing. However it is often better for your child if you set normal limits on behavior and keep most of your family rules and expectations the same.

4 Allow your children to talk about feelings and worries, if they want to. For younger children, encourage play, drawing, and story-telling. Ask your child (and brothers and sisters) what they are thinking, feeling, and imagining. Be a good listener—and share the facts, as well as your feelings and reactions.

5 Encourage your child to spend time with friends. After a serious illness or injury, some children feel a little “different.” They may also wonder how their friends will react. Invite a few of your child’s friends to visit, and help your child plan a few fun activities. It may be helpful to assist your child in answering questions his or her friends may have about the illness or injury (Is it contagious? How long will the bandages be on? etc.)

6 Help your child do some things on his or her own. It is often tempting to do things for your child after he or she is injured or ill. But it is more helpful for children to do things again on their own. As much as the injury or illness allows, encourage your child to do the things (including chores) he or she used to do.

7 Take time to deal with your own feelings. It will be harder to help your child if you are feeling really worried, upset, or overwhelmed. Talk about your feelings with another adult, such as a friend, your doctor, a counselor, or a member of the clergy.

8 Follow up with the doctor. Even if your child is getting better, the doctor needs to know how your child is coping, especially since some injuries and illnesses have behavior changes associated with them. For children and families who need extra help dealing with their reactions, helpful treatments are available. Your doctor will be able to help you figure out what’s best for you and your family.



Developed by the Medical Traumatic Stress Working Group of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

At the Hospital: Helping My Teen Cope

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Traumatic stress symptoms are common after a serious illness, injury, or hospitalization. Even though it is your teen who is ill or injured, your whole family can be affected. At first, as a parent, you might not feel prepared to help your teen (or yourself) cope.

Traumatic stress symptoms can include:

- Being easily upset or angry
- Feeling anxious, jumpy, or confused
- Being irritable or uncooperative
- Feeling empty or numb

Things in the hospital that can be traumatic for teens:

- Uncertainty about what might happen next
- Being in pain or going through painful procedures
- Having a noticeable injury or being permanently injured
- Fear about what others will think of them being sick or in the hospital
- Fear of dying



The hospital can be traumatic for parents too:

Having a sick, injured or hospitalized teen often results in feelings of frustration, sadness, worry, or helplessness.

- For parents, it is a stressful time when relationships with medical staff take priority, and other important relationships and activities get interrupted or put on hold.
- For both parents and teens, the hospital experience often challenges innermost beliefs about safety, vulnerability, and fairness.

In addition, many parents feel unprepared to talk with their sick or injured teens (or their other children) about feelings, fears, and questions.



Special information for parents and caregivers of teens:

There are professionals at the hospital who have experience helping other parents and teens in your situation. If you are upset, have questions about how to help your teen, or just need to talk, please seek out one of the family resources available at the hospital: this might be a social worker, a chaplain, or another mental health professional. It might be helpful to encourage your teen to talk to someone as well. Also, read the other side of this handout for tips on helping your teen cope while at the hospital.

NCTSN

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

www.NCTSN.net

Eight Ways You Can Help Your Teen Cope While At The Hospital



- 1 You are the best person to help your teen.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent hugs and praise. Remind your teen that the medical staff has a lot of experience helping other sick and injured teens.
- 2 Be patient with your teen.** Intense feelings are common but temporary reactions to the hospital experience. Remind your teen that it's okay to be confused, angry, or scared and to talk about his or her feelings. Recognize that your teen may want to appear "grown up," while also feeling afraid and in need of your comfort and support.
- 3 Be honest with your teen.** Teens want information, even if they don't ask. If your teen needs to go through a painful procedure, be honest about the fact that it may hurt, but also explain that its purpose is to help them feel better. The more your teen knows what to expect, the more comfortable he or she will be.

- 4 Include your teen in medical discussions when possible.** Encourage your teen to ask his or her own questions of the doctors and nurses. Help your teen participate in decision-making by planning how to cope with pain and stressful procedures in advance.
- 5 Talk about your feelings together.** Teens often know more than they admit, but can sometimes misinterpret information or other people's feelings. Gently ask questions to learn what your teen thinks and believes, and share your thoughts, feelings, and reactions.
- 6 Teens are self-conscious and will especially worry about how they will look and fit in with others, and about their privacy.** Reassure your teen, but be honest. Find ways of respecting and supporting your teen's privacy. Allow your teen to do some things on his or her own with regard to care.
- 7 Help your teen stay connected with old friends, as well as make new friends.** Ask the medical staff to help you introduce your teen to others on the floor with similar experiences.
- 8 Take care of yourself.** Your teen can tell if you are worried, upset, or not sleeping, which will make it harder on everyone. Don't be afraid to ask family or friends for help. Talk about your worries with other adults, such as family, friends, a counselor, a member of the clergy, or your doctor.



Developed by the Medical Traumatic Stress Working Group of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

After the Hospital: Getting Back to a Schedule

After coming home from the hospital, Tracy couldn't go back to school yet. In this story, Tracy found a way of doing some normal things each day. Hercules the dog would like to hear your story too.



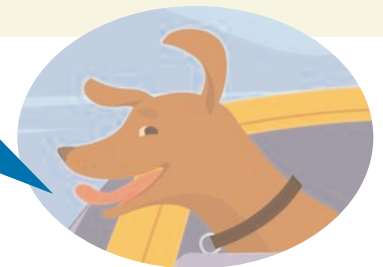
When I was sick and in the hospital, someone from my family was always with me. Even though I didn't feel well, having someone around made me feel safe. It helped me think about things other than being sick.

When I came home, my doctor said I couldn't go back to school yet. For the first few days, I stayed upstairs in bed, watching cartoons while mom worked on the computer downstairs. Being in bed all day was like being in the hospital! Mom brought me some homework from my teachers at school, but I didn't want to do it. Then she pulled out my favorite card game, but I didn't feel like doing that either. My mom asked: "Other than feeling sick, is there anything else bothering you?" Mom and I talked and figured out that being at home and missing out on stuff with my friends made me feel bored and sad. Mom said, "maybe you'd feel better if your day was more like it usually is." "How can I do that?" I asked. "I can't even go to school." "But there are lots of things you can do to get back to your regular schedule," Mom said.

That was true. Mom helped me get dressed every morning. Instead of staying in bed, I came downstairs. I started to get caught up on my schoolwork, sitting at the desk where mom was working. I wasn't so lonely, and she was right there to help when I had a question. Mom and I even played cards each day after lunch. I got back to doing my chores again, too — feeding the dog and clearing the table after dinner. When I was well enough to go out, my family and I went to see a movie. That was really fun because I got to choose the movie. Mom let me call my friends on the phone and invite one over to visit. I was worried that none of my friends would want to visit since I was still sick. But Jamie came over one day and we watched movies and played cards. I'm not back to school yet, but I'm doing a lot more things now and seeing more friends.



Share with Tracy and me how you are trying to get back into a schedule. Fill in the blanks to tell your story.



Some of the things I really miss being able to do since I went to the hospital are

_____ and _____. When I think about the things
(something you miss doing) (something else you miss doing)

I still can't do, I feel _____. Someone that I can talk to about my feelings is

_____. Even though I can't do everything I used to do, I can do some things that would help me

feel like the old me again, like _____ and _____.
(something you can do) (something else you can do)

If I could spend some special time with someone now that I'm home, I would ask _____ to

_____ with me.
(something you like doing)



Many doctors write prescriptions for patients with things to help them feel better. What would *your* prescription say? Write or draw a prescription to help you feel better.



KID'S FIRST MEDICAL CENTER

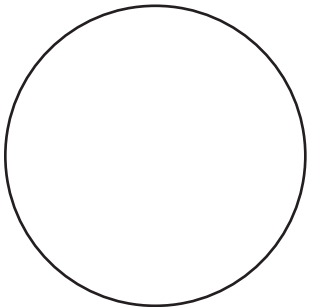


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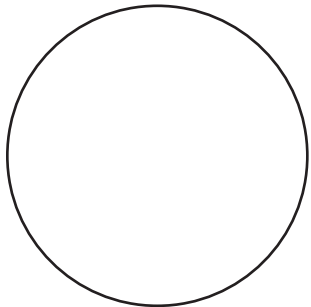
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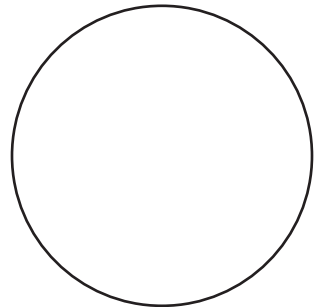
When kids come home from the hospital, they sometimes forget how much better they are feeling. In the blank faces below, draw a face of how you felt when you first went to the hospital, how you felt (or will feel) when you go home, and how you felt (or will feel) when you go back to school. Do your three faces look different from each other?



Draw a face of how you felt when you first went to the hospital.



Draw a face of how you felt (or will feel) when you come home from the hospital.



Draw a face of how you felt (or will feel) when you go back to school and see your friends.

What Do I Say? Talking About What Happened With Others

After being injured, Jesse was worried about what others would think. With help, Jesse figured out what to say to others. After the story, can you tell Hercules the dog about what happened to you?



I don't remember my accident, but it hurt a lot when I woke up in the hospital. I remember getting X-rays and that I had two operations! The doctors told me they could fix the parts of my body that were broken. But they said that I might walk funny and look different for awhile, because of my injuries. I was worried about what I would tell my friends when they saw me.

After my operations, I went to PT: physical therapy. That's a place where kids and adults work to make their bodies strong enough to go home. I kept to myself at PT. I didn't know what people would say about the weird way I walked and the cuts from my accident.

In the gym, I saw a girl — Kim — who walked funny too. She was using crutches. Kim came over to talk to me: "I'm getting better. Soon I won't need my crutches. What happened to you?" I felt weird because I didn't know what to say. Later, my therapist said to me: "You looked worried when Kim asked what happened." "I guess so." I said. My therapist said: "Lots of people have a hard time talking about what happened to them. But it gets easier with practice. Maybe we can figure out what you want to say to other people about your accident."



My therapist got me started, and then I practiced telling my doctor and my family. When I saw Kim again, I told her and the other kids about my accident, just as I practiced it. Kim said she felt better because she was worried she had hurt my feelings when she asked me what happened. My therapist was right — knowing what to say and being able to talk about my accident got easier with practice and I feel better!

Fill in the blanks in the story below. It can help you figure out how to talk about what happened to you.



Since I came to the hospital, I have talked about what happened to me with

_____ and _____. The hardest part about talking with others about what
(name of person) (name of another person)

happened to me is _____. I do / I do not feel worried about talking with other
(why it is hard) (check one)

people about what happened to me. One of the reasons I do / I do not feel nervous is because _____.
(check one) (reason)

Some of the important things I'd like to tell others about what happened include _____ and
(something I'd like to tell others)

_____. One person that I can practice talking with is _____.
(something else I'd like to tell others) (name of person)



Draw a picture or write about what happened to you. Practice talking about what happened by explaining your drawing or by reading what you wrote to someone you trust.



Jesse was worried about what other people would say. Write what you think the people below are wondering about your illness or injury. Talk to your parents or another adult about what you would say to them.



When it Hurts: Dealing with Pain

Jordan had some painful treatment at the hospital. But Anita helped Jordan learn new ways to cope with the pain. After the story, Hercules the dog wants to hear about how you've coped with pain too.



I sometimes have pain from my illness, but never this bad. I was afraid something really bad was wrong with me. I was crying hard when my Grandma and I got to the ER. This lady from the hospital, Anita, asked if I wanted to blow bubbles while waiting for the doctor. She said it would be fun. It did help me forget about my pain for awhile.

When I finally saw the doctor, he told me that I'd have to stay in the hospital and that I'd have to get medicine through a needle. I told Grandma I was scared. She said I'd be okay, but we should ask the doctor to explain what they were going to do. Dr. Blum talked to me about how the medicine would help my pain and my illness. He said that because of my illness I might have pain like this again sometimes. He told me Anita knew some games that would help me cope with the pain.

Anita and I came up with a pretend story about one of my favorite things — swimming in the pool on a hot day. She taught me to think about that whenever I had to get the medicine through the needle. She also taught me a relaxation game where I made my arms and my legs go floppy and took deep breaths. We talked about other things I've done before to help with my pain — like playing games, watching cartoons, or listening to music. We made a list of them so that I could remember how to cope with the pain. Grandma also came up with the idea of an “ice cream coupon.” She'd give me a coupon every time I tried to do one of the things on the list when getting my medication through the needle.



The first time I got the medicine through the needle, I started to cry and forgot about all the things Anita taught me. But Grandma pulled out the list and we went through my pretend story about the swimming pool. It helped! The next time I got the needle, we did the story again and I didn't think about my pain as much. I can't say I liked being at the hospital, but I learned a lot about how to deal with my pain. And now that I'm home, I have three ice cream coupons from Grandma that I'm going to use!



Everyone feels pain sometimes. What are the ways you have coped with your pain? Fill in the blanks to complete the story.

In the hospital, the things that were painful were _____
(something that was painful)

and _____. Being in pain made me feel _____. Some of
(something else that was painful) (how you felt)

the things that helped me feel better were _____ and _____.
(something that made you feel better) (something else that made you feel better)

The people who helped me feel better when I was in pain were _____.
(names of people)

The next time I feel pain, I can do _____ to help feel better.
(what you can do)



A team of people at the hospital helped Jordan deal with pain.
 Choose the people below you would ask to be on *your* team and use the squares to write the things that you and they can do together to help you cope with pain.



Being in the hospital and feeling pain can make you feel a lot of different feelings. Use different colors in the picture on the right to show how this girl feels about being in the hospital and coping with pain.



Making a Plan: Dealing with Things that Remind You of What Happened

After a bike accident, Angel was nervous about riding bikes again. With help, Angel came up with a plan to cope with being scared. After the story, will you share your plan with Hercules the dog?



My step-dad and I were riding bikes when a car came around the corner and hit my back tire. I heard a screech as the car tried to stop. I fell to the ground and couldn't move my arm. Even though my step-dad was with me, I remember being scared as I rode in the ambulance. The sirens were so loud. At the hospital, I had to have 2 operations on my arm and stay there until I could move it better.

I went home and when my doctor said I could ride bikes again, my step-dad really wanted me to get back on my bike. I was scared at first, but my step-dad came with me. For the first few times, we rode near our house. When I got scared, my step-dad helped me calm down by having me stop my bike and telling me I was safe.

Two days later, when we were riding, I heard a car tire screech. My heart started beating fast, I felt dizzy and like I couldn't breathe. It felt like my accident all over again! I felt so shaky that I couldn't ride my bike anymore that day. My step-dad said it was okay to take a break but that we should try it again soon. Later that night, he helped me work out a plan to feel safe again when I get scared like that. Here's the plan: we can ride bikes just in the neighborhood. When I get scared, I can stop, get off my bike, and wait a few minutes till I calm down or we can walk it home. My step-dad also taught me how to take deep breaths to help me calm down when I'm having a hard time.



A few days later, we started riding on our street again. My heart pounded when some cars went by, but I remembered the plan and calmed myself down. The first time it happened, I had to stop and walk the bike to a safe place. The next time, I just stopped, calmed myself down, and then rode a little more. Now I'm riding by myself sometimes – still staying near the house – but I'm getting a little less scared each time.

Tell your story like Angel did by filling in the blanks below.



The reason I went to the hospital was because _____.
(reason)

When I think about what happened to me now, I feel _____.
(how you feel when you think about it)

Some of the things that remind me of what happened to me are _____ and _____.
(something that reminds you of what happened)

_____. If I think about what happened and get upset, one way I can calm down is by _____.
(something you can do to calm down)

I could also talk to _____ about how I feel. The next time
(name of person)

I get upset about what happened, I plan to: _____.
(your plan)



Dealing with things that remind you of what happened can be hard, but it helps if you break it down into smaller steps. What do you want to try to do again? On the top step, write down (or draw) your goal – the thing you want to do again. On the other steps, write (or draw) things you can do to help reach your goal. If you can't think of anything, you can use some of the ideas on the side, or you can ask someone in your family to help you with this.

Suggested Goals:

- Ride my bike again
- Play with my friends
- Go back to school

Steps you can take to get you there:

- Ask someone for help
- Make a plan
- Talk about a feeling or problem.
- Ask someone in my family to help me the first few times.
- Try it out for a few minutes the first time.
- Do something you enjoy.



Sometimes, after an illness or an injury, we think about all the things that we can't do, and we don't remember all the good things we can still do. On each of the notes below, write yourself a reminder of all the good things you like to do AND can still do now!

