

HOW CAN WAR (CONFLICT/STRESS/TRAUMA) AFFECT CHILDREN?

*Children may experience traumatic events differently and have somewhat different reactions depending on their age and level of development.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Anger, irritability
- Anxiety and fears of things that did not seem scary before, being alone and separated from parents and loved ones, bad things happening, and falling asleep
- Disappointment and sadness about losses
- Helplessness and powerlessness
- Hopelessness about the future
- Loneliness
- Numbness and/or shock (absence of emotion) about what has happened or is happening
- Shame and guilt with regard to reactions and behaviour before, during, and after the traumatic event

BEHAVIOURAL RESPONSES

- Aggressive behaviours and argumentativeness
- Avoidance of emotions, people, or situations
- Clinginess
- Crying outbursts
- Difficulty falling asleep and sleeping alone, nightmares, night terrors
- Intolerance of, or excessive responsiveness to, others' distress
- Loss of previously acquired developmental skills (e.g. bedwetting, baby talk, dependence on parents)
- Reckless behaviours, including substance use and high-risk sexual activity
- Repetitive talking about traumatic events or play that represents trauma
- Self-harming and suicidal behaviours
- Startling easily

COGNITIVE RESPONSES

- Difficulty finding words
- Difficulty identifying emotions
- Difficulties with problem-solving
- Intrusive thoughts about the recent traumatic events or about the future
- Poor concentration and memory problems
- Thinking that the world is a dangerous place

How may international conflict affect children who are not directly exposed?

Children may find out about traumatic events in other countries from internet and TV, adults' conversations, news shared at school, and from their peers.

Children's reactions to news and images about war can be similar to those experienced by children exposed to trauma directly.

Children may be more vulnerable if they:

- have experienced loss and trauma previously
- have family or friends in the affected region
- belong to the ethnic or cultural group affected by the traumatic event
- come from military families

The way children cope with the trauma may be impacted by their caregivers' reactions and coping.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

The following are ways to support your children if they had direct experience with a traumatic event, or if they are hearing about the war or viewing images of the war through the media.

As a caregiver, you have a lot of responsibility and may be experiencing a lot of stress. It is important that you attend to your reactions to trauma and seek support. This way you can then take care of your children and help them cope better.

Seek out additional resources to support yourself or consult with a registered psychologist or another licensed mental health professional.

1. TALK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

Talking about trauma allows you and your children to make sense of the experience. Processing the experience can contribute to healing and prevent negative outcomes.

Avoidance prevents you from processing the trauma and increases anxiety and other negative outcomes.

Support your children in making sense of their experiences and reactions:

- Ask your children what they know about the events and how they feel about them.
- Clarify any misunderstandings.
- Provide context to help children understand how far away the war is, what it may change and what will stay the same.
- Remind your children that you are there for them. Do not make them talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time they want.
- With younger children, support art and play as ways of expressing emotions and making sense of events. Seek out additional resources or consult with a registered psychologist or another licensed mental health professional.

2. RESPOND TO EMOTIONS

Use the following Emotion-Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) steps for emotional coaching:

1. Attend to the emotion: Acknowledge that your children are experiencing an emotion.

2. Name the emotion: Help your children to label their primary emotions (sadness, hurt, fear, anxiety).

3. Validate the emotion:

- Express understanding of your children's emotions even if you do not agree with or like their reactions.
- Try to avoid minimizing, dismissing, correcting or changing children's emotions. It may make them feel alone in their suffering and suppress or escalate their emotions.
- You can say the following:
 - "It is okay to feel this way."
 - "It makes sense that you are reacting in this way."
 - "I feel this way too sometimes."

4. Meet the need: Respond to their emotional needs.

- **Sadness:** offer your child physical and emotional comfort. You can spend more time with them, make eye contact with them, hold their hands, rub their back and offer hugs.
- **Anger:** help them verbally express their anger and regulate by taking a few slow breaths and trying other emotional regulation skills (see below).
- **Fear/anxiety:** provide protection or support if a situation is unsafe. Help your children face situations with some support if it is not dangerous.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

3. TRY EMOTIONAL REGULATION & RELAXATION SKILLS

5-finger breathing

- Breathe in and out as you trace your five fingers with the index finger of your other hand. Breathe in as you move up the finger, breathe out as you move down.

Play a special kind of “I spy” game to help your children focus and ground themselves in the present moment.

- Ask your child to find 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.

Body scanning

- Ask your child to imagine that a little light can travel up their body from their toes to the tip of their head. For older children, explain that the light is their attention.
- Ask your child to notice and describe sensations in their body parts, as the little light travels up.
- At bedtime, you can use it as a way to say “goodnight” to every part of body, letting it relax.

Help your child engage in enjoyable and soothing activities (e.g., have a cup of tea, have a warm shower or bath, listen to beautiful music, slowly eat a piece of chocolate, go for a nature walk).

4. MAINTAIN STRUCTURE IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE

Stay with daily and weekly routines and family traditions as much as possible. Routines create predictability and feelings of safety for children and adults.

Provide your children with activities to do so they can stay busy, continue to learn and grow, and have breaks from the stress of the situation.

Tell your children what you are going to do as a family, so that they know what to expect.

5. LIMIT EXPOSURE TO MEDIA COVERAGE

Try to ensure that younger children do not have access to the media coverage of the events.

Support older children and teens by limiting the time spent viewing and reading about the events. Help them refrain from doing it at bedtime.

Support your children by talking about the things they may have seen and read about.

6. EMPHASIZE RESOURCES AND HELP

Remind your children that there is a lot your family can do to cope with the situation.

Explain that many people are working together to create peace and to help those affected by the war.

7. TRY TO ACCEPT WHAT YOU CANNOT CHANGE

Accept the presence of emotions or situations that are outside of your control. You or your children may say, “It is what it is.”

Try not to deny your situation, or wish that it should be different. Acceptance can allow everyone to spend more energy and resources on solving problems, rather than fighting your reality.

Try to think of things you and your child can do in this situation to take care of yourselves and offer support to others.

WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION AND PROFESSIONAL HELP?

Finding a psychologist and other mental health professionals

[!\[\]\(dfbd6b3763a6d1d9afaa974f64e2e4b5_img.jpg\) Psychology Today](#)

[!\[\]\(e78f798d4ea5c530c9db49e7d26e6b95_img.jpg\) Therapy Owl](#)

[!\[\]\(23d9fc146e83b5c3013cfa32c784f8d5_img.jpg\) Provincial and Territorial Psychology Associations](#)

Resources in English

[!\[\]\(ec9132f1d27c8919987d92907322654d_img.jpg\) Psychological First Aid](#)

[!\[\]\(05be7c7a8995decd503647c99211f7c2_img.jpg\) Child Traumatic Stress](#)

[!\[\]\(aa53ad6fea213b8b2226d3077e30533a_img.jpg\) What is Child Trauma?](#)

[!\[\]\(dd161862f9164df98f62b726e9846241_img.jpg\) Child Trauma Guide](#)

[!\[\]\(758ebdf4629c903da74c2e079717ae32_img.jpg\) Trauma and Grief in Children](#)

[!\[\]\(fe3aebe81acea8d45108cd2768939da7_img.jpg\) Helping Children Cope with Frightening News](#)

[!\[\]\(626ce8ac21792b9405bfddfea8e0c96a_img.jpg\) Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)

Resources in Ukrainian

[!\[\]\(248b91fcdac4810ffd15cf33fb6aec6f_img.jpg\) Talking to children about war](#)

[!\[\]\(899d8b7697d64725bf017d3296cfcf1b_img.jpg\) Parent tips for helping pre-school age children after disasters](#)

[!\[\]\(c1168d6a8b365d11e842ece304635fa7_img.jpg\) Parent tips for helping adolescents after disasters](#)

[!\[\]\(cbd8541a32dfc32f356f5c6c994b0a21_img.jpg\) Coping in hard times fact sheet for high-school and college students](#)

[!\[\]\(d3e32d099174a7c248ec1f564ee4f69c_img.jpg\) Psychological First Aid tips for adults](#)

[!\[\]\(40770d9ed6ed4f1222ebf89a1396e8b2_img.jpg\) How to Help Children After a Traumatic Event](#)

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