



Post-Trauma Services Committee

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC STRESS RESPONSES IN CHILDREN A Handout for Parents or Caregivers

Characteristic signs of distress are often, **but not always**, seen in children following exposure to a traumatic event (such as a natural disaster, accident, or act of violence). The distress related to such events is usually short lived and generally not a cause for worry. However, when children witness, experience, or become aware of traumatic events, they **may** develop symptoms of distress.

What are some of the common stress responses?

Common responses in children may include physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms, such as:

- Feeling frightened; not wanting to be alone; separation anxiety
- Being more jumpy to sudden sounds or movements
- Avoiding any talk about the traumatic event; social withdrawal
- Preoccupation with the traumatic event; retelling and replaying the trauma
- Worries about the safety of self / others
- Worries about death or the future
- Sleep difficulties (e.g., nightmares, insomnia, bedwetting)
- Appetite changes
- Aches and pains
- Feeling sad, moody, or irritable; loss of pleasure in enjoyable activities; changes in temperament
- Feelings of confusion, shame, or guilt
- Trouble concentrating
- Regressive behaviours (e.g., a return to thumb sucking, baby talk; toileting accidents)
- Aggressive or self-harm behaviour; accident proneness or recklessness

If the child develops several of the above signs following exposure to a traumatic event, then you may wish to have the child seen by your family doctor or a mental health professional such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

What can you do to help a child feel better?

- Provide comfort, reassurance and opportunities for talking about feelings.
- Maintain routines and avoid overloading the child with new or challenging tasks.
- Listen for possible distortions and misunderstandings of the trauma; provide corrective information.
- Expect and tolerate repetitious retelling of the event.
- Be mindful of your own reactions and anxiety when discussing the event.
- Encourage regular physical activity.