

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD in Children

Children are often exposed to trauma as a result of the following kinds of events:

- physical or sexual assault or abuse
- family and community violence
- experiencing or witnessing severe accidents
- natural or technological disasters
- life-threatening illnesses
- war

Many studies have shown that there is a connection between children's exposure to traumatic events and psychological problems. These include not only full-scale PTSD, but also problems with:

- peer relationships
- relationships within the family
- self-esteem
- school activities and performance
- sexual behavior (in cases of sexual abuse)
- emotional development
- depression and anger
- physical health
- substance abuse
- fears
- anger
- guilt
- feeling ashamed

PTSD Symptoms in Children

PTSD symptoms in children may last for a long time, and may include:

- disturbing memories or flashbacks
- repeated nightmares and dreams of death
- belief in omens and prediction of disastrous future events
- pessimism about the future and expectation of early death
- avoiding reminders of traumatic experiences

- fear of re-experiencing traumatic anxiety
- behavioral re-enactment (expressed as repetitive play)
- emotional numbness (seeming to have no feelings, except perhaps anger)
- diminished interest in significant activities
- physical symptoms, such as stomachaches and headaches
- feeling constantly on guard, or nervous and jumpy

Possible Psychiatric Symptoms

In addition, surviving or witnessing traumatic events may intensify symptoms of other psychiatric disorders, such as:

- attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder
- dissociative disorders
- eating disorders
- major depression
- oppositional defiant disorder
- panic disorder
- phobias
- separation anxiety disorder

Treatment of PTSD for Children

Treatment of PTSD in children generally involves "talking therapies" (such as cognitive behavioral therapy, family therapy, or brief psychotherapy), and may include the prescription of medication by a psychiatrist. The goals are:

1. helping the child to remember the traumatic events safely
2. addressing the child's family life, peer relationships, and school performance
3. dealing with grief, anger, depression, anxiety, and behavioral disturbances

It is best to seek treatment from a professional with expertise in this area. Many therapists with this expertise are members of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, whose membership

directory contains a geographical listing indicating those who treat children and adolescents.

Other Sources of Support

Rapid, timely, and sensitive care for the community as well as for affected individuals and families is the key to preventing PTSD in the wake of violence (and of reducing violence itself). Mental health professionals with expertise in community violence can contribute in several ways:

1. Helping community leaders to join together to develop violence prevention and victim assistance programs.
2. Helping religious, educational and healthcare leaders and organizations to set up relief centers and shelters.
3. Providing direct psychological services near the site of violence. These might include debriefing survivors, supervising a 24-hour crisis hotline, and identifying survivors or bereaved family members who are at high risk for developing PTSD (and helping them to get connected with appropriate continuing treatment, to either prevent or recover from PTSD).
4. Providing education, debriefing, and referrals for affected children at their schools, often working with teachers.
5. Providing organizational consultation to government, business, and healthcare programs affected by the violence.

This information is presented for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for informed medical advice or training. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a mental health problem without consulting a qualified health or mental health care provider.

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HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU WOULD BENEFIT FROM COUNSELING?

These conditions or situations are widely experienced and may indicate the need for professional counseling:

- Depression, discouragement
- Lack of motivation, apathy
- Anger, bitterness, resentment
- General dissatisfaction with life or relationships
- Difficulties in handling life events
- Marriage and family conflicts
- Sexual dysfunction
- Difficulties in decision making
- Physical ailments for which no medical cause can be found, such as headaches and lower back pain. (Medical consultation may be required in conjunction with therapy.)
- Difficulty in building and maintaining satisfying relationships
- Job stress, inability to keep jobs
- Inability to deal with a child's misbehavior or school problems
- Compulsive behaviors (eating disorders, spending, sexual issues)
- Issues related to low self-esteem or lack of self-worth
- Excessive dependence upon the approval or validation of others

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POST TRAUMATIC DISORDER IN CHILDREN



*Resources for
Dealing With
PTSD in Children*