

# How children and adolescents can respond to trauma

Trauma can occur when we are faced with a challenging situation such as the loss of a home, a life-threatening experience, the loss of a family member, etc. Such situations can cause a great deal of stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, hatred and other unwelcome emotions, not only immediately after the event but even months or years afterwards. You can read more about what trauma is in **What is trauma**.

Each child reacts to intense, stressful situations in different ways, and so it follows that trauma will manifest itself differently in every child. This raises the question, how are we supposed to recognize when a child is experiencing chronic stress in response to a threatening event?

Children may respond this way:

- **The restless child** – A child may be restless, excessively active and agitated, and exhibit impulsive behaviour, behave aggressively towards toys and other objects, or easily forget information.
- **The passive child** – These children are quiet and very calm, submissive, tend to isolate themselves, show signs of apathy, do not want to play and are not interested in things around them.

- **The restless and passive child** – The moods of this child change extremely quickly, the child behaves dismissively towards others, and yet, at the same time, requires the closeness of the other person. Their social activity alternates rapidly with a tendency to isolate themselves.
- **Children with medical problems** – This child often has trouble sleeping (can't fall asleep easily), experiences flashbacks, wets themself, and is always exhausted; this child may also have low self-esteem, lose weight, and complain about headaches or abdominal pain.



**Flashbacks** are involuntary, intense and disturbing memories of a traumatic event that can be triggered by a variety of stimuli. Flashbacks can be experienced as vivid and disturbing memories that the mind replays as if they were happening in the present moment. They can also trigger physical reactions such as heart palpitations, breathing difficulties or a feeling of disconnection from one's own body. Someone may experience flashbacks as visual memories, for example, a traumatic event replaying in their mind. Others may experience flashbacks in the form of sounds, smells, or other sensations that are associated with the trauma. These flashbacks can be so vivid and realistic that the person may often have difficulty telling them apart from reality.

If the child behaves in any of the ways mentioned above, remember that:

- The child is not misbehaving to annoy you.
- The child is not lazy.
- The child is not spoiled.

These behavioural patterns are merely the child's way of coping with excessive anxiety, stress and insecurity arising from difficult and traumatic experiences.

## Triggers of traumatic reactions

Some sensations (e.g. sounds, smells, specific body postures) may remind the child of a situation that was very stressful or threatening to them. Although the context of the situation is completely different and the child is not in danger, the traumatic memory triggers automatic reactions as if the child was in real danger. The child becomes overwhelmed by emotions and feelings that they cannot control and therefore react in a way that does not seem fitting for the actual situation. It is important to realise that some conduct that may be perceived as 'bad' or 'misbehaving' can actually be reflecting intense and unpleasant emotions linked to traumatic experiences in the past.

This is a psychiatric disorder characterised by delayed and/or prolonged response to stressful events that are threatening to the person and cause anxiety that cannot be managed by normal adaptive mechanisms. PTSD can occur at any age after the first year of our life. Symptoms usually appear in the first three months after a traumatic event, but there can be a delay of many months or even years. PTSD requires psychiatric evaluation and the help of a professional. A child who develops PTSD often relives the trauma and events related to the traumatic situation, and may even experience flashbacks or nightmares. These unpleasant episodes can lead to the child avoiding specific triggering situations or trying not to think about them. They can also begin feeling numb or, conversely, very agitated.



Taking care of a traumatized child requires a change of perspective. Try not to see the child's behaviour as problematic, but as a manifestation (consequence) of a very difficult experience.

You can read more about how to help a child who has experienced a traumatic event in **How to help a child during a difficult period**.

## Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Some children may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of intense, stressful events.