



Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Children

What is PTSD?

Fear of re-experiencing or re-experiencing of a traumatic event, eg molestation, rape, severe burns, riots that results in decreased responsiveness and avoidance of events connected with original stress. The event in itself may be insignificant and a direct threat. Response to stress is different for each child and depends on his/ her personality.

WHAT COMMONLY CAUSES STRESS?

The causes are different at different ages.

Children may get acutely stressed after witnessing natural calamities (earthquakes, floods etc) and the damage there of (building collapses, dead bodies and cattle floating in water). Today with all pervasive Television it can affect even children living on the other side of the world.

Acts of terrorism like the Sept 11, 2001 crash of World Trade Centre at New York (October poll on growingwell website shows that of all mothers who voted as high as 76%, said that their children were badly affected by seeing it on TV).

Religious riots and bombing in Mumbai in 93-94 also affected children.

So too, witnessing an accident, especially in which a friend or relative is involved.

Disharmony between parents, acts of violence and divorce leads to guilt and stress in a child.

A child may get severely stressed if beaten by a teacher and find it difficult to overcome it.

A child who is sexually assaulted is left with an indelible stressor.

Adolescents may get stressed due to physical

changes (perceived as not proper) and career prospects.

HOW DO CHILDREN REACT TO STRESS?

Reactions to stress differ. One may be either anxious, depressed or develop a physical symptom. Some children may stop eating, others may start stammering after having spoken normally all life. Others may (re)start bedwetting or encopresis.

Grown up kids may resort to smoking.

Common psychological symptoms are fear (of facing the stressor again); anger (frustration); guilt or shame (over helplessness).

Reactions to acute stress may be confusion, lack of sleep, inability to concentrate, nightmares etc.

WHAT EXACTLY DO CHILDREN FEEL?

They generally become "hyper"—startle at the slightest stimulus, thoughts intruding the activity going on, sleep problems, nightmares, dreams about the event and hyper alertness (Mom! The building is shaking—in the aftermath of an earthquake) or (Mom, look at that man with beard) The symptoms are aggravated by events reminding one of the stressor event. Sometime the symptoms arise after a long time like child sexual abuse manifesting after marriage.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Treatment is mainly Psychotherapy. Family support matters a lot. In some instance medicines (sedatives etc) may be used. Avoidance or telling a child NOT to watch it on TV or cut out gruesome pictures from newspapers does not help.

MANAGING PTSD IN CHILDREN

SAFETY OF FAMILY and people you know. Parents should offer immediate reassurance by letting the child know that people closest to him are fine. Even though obvious, count out members of immediate family like—

Dr CH ASRANI DMB
Sainath Clinic
Kalina,
Mumbai 400 098
Tel: 26181348
email: chasrani@vsnl.com



Mother, father, brothers and sisters—are all safe. This is essential even if you are nowhere near the site of the tragedy or act of violence. Child is disturbed as he/she feels this may threaten immediate surroundings. Next, reassure your child about other relatives—Grandma and Granddad, for example. Repeating the list of near and dear ones who are all right will be comforting not only for your child but for you as well. If possible, let the child talk to them on phone.

DAILY ROUTINE: Maintaining daily routine is the best way to convey to your child that all is fine. If the trouble is away from your locality it is easy but if it is too close to home, maintaining a routine or at least a semblance of it, is important. A regular routine always gives children a sense of security.

DETAILS OF EVENTS. It is advisable to turn off the television for the sake of young children, if they are around. It is equally important to catch unfolding events. To balance both, if your children are watching, make sure that you sit with them, to help explain what is happening and anticipate and answer their questions. All of us are more able to handle shocking news in print, than television.

SECURITY SHIELD: Tell your child that the police, law abiding citizens and the Government are ensuring safety of every one.

POSITIVE THINKING: If your child knows that there has been violence or thousands have died in an earthquake

or that a plane has crashed or a building has collapsed, you must reassure him that almost all the other planes and buildings are still completely safe. He must be told that such bad events only happen in very few places.

CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS: Even very young children are acutely aware of the emotional state of their parents. You don't have to hide your emotions; It's fine to let your children know that you are upset and sad, but make it clear that you're not upset with *them*, and try to be as calm and reassuring as possible. A hug at such a time is as comforting for you (knowing that your child is safe in your arms) as it is for your child.

PATIENCE: If exposed to a tragedy, you must expect that your children, no matter how young, will show signs of distress—either in the form of fussiness, fear, nightmares or tantrums. These are normal reactions and you should be ready to deal with them with understanding and patience.

LOOK AFTER YOURSELF: It's very important to pay attention to your own levels of stress and shock while handling your children. If you feel a physical response to the event like palpitations, heaviness in the chest, sweating etc—these are normal and expectable responses. You must try finding a friend, relative or colleague and talk it out. If required, listen to theirs too. You must get this support for yourself, since this is crucial for you to remain calm.

“Think excitement, talk excitement, act out excitement, and you are bound to become an excited person. Life will take on a new zest, deeper interest and greater meaning. You can think, talk and act yourself into dullness or into monotony or into unhappiness. By the same process you can build up inspiration, excitement and surging depth of joy.”

- Norman Vincent Peale -