

How do I know if my child or young person is having trouble?

It is not always possible to judge if or when children are scared or worried about things happening in their life. They may be reluctant to talk about their fears or may not be aware of how they are being affected by the things happening to them and around them. Parents can look for clues as to how their child is reacting.

Some children are naturally more prone to be fearful, and news of a dangerous situation may heighten their feelings of anxiety. At the other extreme, some children become immune to, or ignore the violence and suffering depicted in the news. They can get overloaded and become numb due to the repetitive nature of the reports. Children and young people who have previously experienced bereavement, separation, abuse, violence or other trauma are more likely to feel sad at this time. Parents should get further help if they see such things as:

- a significant change in, or problems with, behaviour such as eating or sleeping
- sad, withdrawn, worried or depressed behaviour that does not resolve
- acting-out behaviour and inappropriate behaviour
- frequent new, unusual, or unexplained physical complaints
- symptoms that are affecting the child's ability to function at home, at school, with friends

Resources in Times of Uncertainty

The emotional impact of traumatic events or family illness can have devastating effects on the mental well-being of individuals of all ages. For many of us, it is easy to focus all of our energies on helping other people or on maintaining our daily schedules and routines. Although these efforts deserve our attention, it is important to remember to take care of yourself and to monitor your own emotions during difficult times.

Tending to your own mental health and emotional well-being will make you a better, more reliable resource for friends and family members

- Talk to people about what you are feeling. This is great role modelling
- Remember the good times you have had
- Stay connected with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, etc., to avoid feeling isolated.
- Reflect about your feelings and beliefs with young people. Spiritual rituals and discussions can be very important activities to do as a family and as a community.
- Watch your diet. Many people overeat when they are under stress, which can lead to further feelings of guilt, sadness and hopelessness.
- Get regular exercise to help relieve stress and stay healthy
- Relaxation techniques are also helpful for daily stress.
- Keep a regular sleep pattern
- Maintain a daily routine as much as possible.
- Find something constructive and/or fun to do.

IN TIME OF STRESS AND CONFLICT, DON'T FORGET THE CHILDREN

Promoting positive mental health and the well being of children, adolescents and their families should be a high priority for governments, human service organizations and schools throughout the year. Paying added attention to the mental and emotional health of our children and adolescents is even more important during times of major stress and conflict such as the world is currently experiencing.

Thus, WFMH urges parents, teachers, and others who care for children and adolescents - "IN TIME OF STRESS AND CONFLICT, DON'T FORGET THE CHILDREN!"

The following information offers some suggestions and activities that can be used by adults to help children and young people better understand and cope with the very real and natural reactions they are experiencing as a result of the events surrounding them.

FEARS AND ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal part of life for children, adolescents and adults. This is usually a temporary response to stress. In time of war, the factors that cause increased levels of anxiety and fear for young people are many and may include:

- Separation from parents who are in the military and are called to active duty.
- Non-stop media coverage that may include "real time" action and depictions of violence and death.
- Expressions of anger, worry or fears by parents and other adults in the presence of children.
- For those living in or near "war zones," concerns for basic safety and survival.

While anxiety and fears are normal emotions, prolonged exposure to real and perceived danger and uncertainty can have a harmful impact on the emotional health of children, and may, in some instances, require assistance from mental health professionals. Untreated severe and persistent anxiety that lasts for a longer period of time may make it difficult for a child to participate in normal activities and enjoy life. Parents, teachers and other caretakers need to be particularly aware of the stress, fear, and anxiety that children experience in response to war and its related events - and to help them understand, cope with, and overcome their concerns and worries.

Some Signs to Look For

A child or adolescent with anxiety may show some of the following signs:

- Constant thoughts and fears about the safety of self and parents.
- Refusing to go to school.
- Frequent stomachaches and other physical complaints.
- Becoming upset or worried about sleeping away from home.

Mental Health Awareness Week 2003

- Becoming panicky or having tantrums when separated from parents.
- Finding it difficult to meet or talk to new people.
- Withdrawing from situations that will involve meeting new people.
- Worrying excessively about things before they happen.
- Worrying excessively about school, friends, sports.
- Needing a lot of reassurance to try anything new.
- Being preoccupied with cleanliness and hand washing.
- Finding it difficult to relax or go to sleep.

Family Help Kit, "Fears and Anxiety" NSW HEALTH, New South Wales, Australia)

How Adults Can Help

There are many things that parents and other people who are important to children and adolescents can do to help them cope with heightened anxiety and traumatic situations:

- First of all, don't be hesitant to talk to children and adolescents about their fears and anxieties, and the reasons for such emotions.
- When a child brings up the traumatic event, don't discourage them from talking about it and about how it affects them.
- Use language that is appropriate to their age.
- Provide them with simple honest answers. Imagined details may be more disturbing and may only worsen their anxiety, rather than helping them overcome it.
- Be prepared to discuss the same details many times. Be patient, and repeat clear honest answers for the child.
- Help your child avoid false reasoning about the cause of the events that are disturbing them. Let them know that adults also don't always understand why things happen.
- Ensure that they realize they are not to blame for what has happened.
- Do your best to be supportive, loving and predictable.
- Notify other carers and teachers that the child is experiencing heightened anxiety and fear
- Encourage them to engage in physical play and exercise.
- Seek help early when it becomes apparent that the child's anxiety and fears are having an impact on their emotional and physical health.

(From World Federation of Mental Health)

HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Children and adolescents experience grief and loss for all the same reasons as adults. They may also experience these same feelings for reasons that don't affect adults and which may seem strange and unreasonable to parents, teachers, and other caretakers. Many children are, for example, personally effected by media reports of death, injury and hardship experienced during time of war and conflict, by the death of a pet, by the presence of family conflict, moving to a new home, or other seemingly routine events of daily life.

Understanding the impact that grief and loss can have on the emotional and behavioural health of children, and their response to it, is important for parents, teachers and others who care for them. Children may feel especially vulnerable and insecure when families suffer a loss. They may believe that they are responsible for what has happened. It is easy for them to misunderstand what is happening unless parents discuss the situation and any changes that may occur as a result.

Separation and divorce are particularly hard on children. Conflict between parents almost always creates confusion, anger, and grief, as well as anxiety about their own future. At such times, both parents need to assure their children of their continued love and commitment. Temporary separation caused by work responsibility away from home, or by active military service in time of war or civil conflict, creates major anxiety and uncertainty for children. Media reports of war heighten the fear that the child feels for the survival and safe return of their parent. Parents and care givers need to help children interpret and understand the events being depicted through the media, and monitor the amount of time children spend watching television and using their computers to follow events.

Pre-school children see death as temporary and reversible, like the cartoon characters on their television. By the ages of 5 to 9, children start to think more like adults but still can't believe it could happen to them or anyone they know. As well as the shock and confusion a child feels at the death of a family member, adults' own feelings can make it difficult for them to cope with the emotional and physical needs of their children. Professional counselling may help guide families through this difficult time.

The Family Help Kit prepared by NSW Health of New South Wales, Australia (www.health.nsw.gov.au) offers a number of helpful tips on how parents can help children cope with grief and loss:

- Let them know that they are loved and that you are there for them
- Let them know that it is not their fault
- Answer their questions simply and honestly and where possible include them when making decisions that will affect them
- Be tolerant of their behaviours as it may be their only way of expressing their feelings

Mental Health Awareness Week 2003

- Try to find out how they are feeling. Let them cry, talk or express their anger in a safe way
- If they can't talk to you, encourage them to talk to others whom they trust
- Keep things as familiar as you can (school, friends, pets, precious possessions)
- It's OK to show your feelings. Showing your children how you cope will help them
- Let their school or teacher know what is happening.

(World Federation of Mental Health)