

Recognizing  
**signs of trauma**  
in **children**  
impacted  
by war

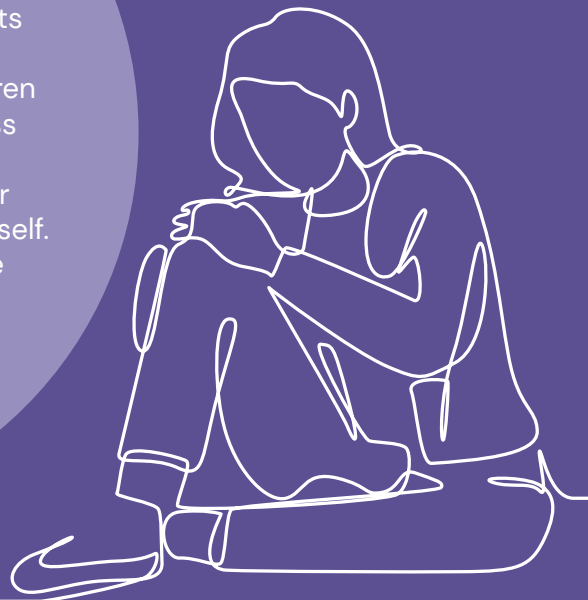


# You are not alone / Ти не сам

If you are reading this because you and your child has been directly impacted by war, the first thing to say is you are not alone – there is support available. You and your family may have experienced traumatic and life-changing events. It is difficult for human beings to process this, particularly children. But with support, trauma can be healed.

This leaflet is about spotting the signs and symptoms of trauma in children who have been impacted by war.

**If you recognize some of the signs and symptoms in your child, please do consider reaching out for help.** There are therapists who understand the impact of traumatic experiences on children and can help children to process their experiences. It is also important that you reach out for the support that you need yourself. You will be able to provide more support for your child if you too are receiving the help you need.



War can have a devastating impact on the mental health of affected populations. The impact of having your home under threat, witnessing or being subject to traumatic events, losing loved ones, leaving friends and possessions behind, or being transported somewhere new with so much uncertainty, can be overwhelmingly distressing.

For children, this impact can be profound. Children who have experienced the trauma of war may experience high rates of mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Trauma may exacerbate preexisting mental disorders in children including ADHD in terms of symptoms severity and persistence. Additionally, trauma can increase level of somatic symptoms (e.g. pain, fatigue, shortness of breath).

It is also important to note that not every child exposed

## The devastating impact of war on mental health

to traumatic events will be impacted in this way. Existing research assessing rates of PTSD showed rates of 24.8% in preschool children and 16% in older children and adolescents. If symptoms occur, then support may be needed to help recovery.

But sometimes, the distress of a child following trauma may be harder to spot or understand due to children's difficulties communicating or articulating their experiences. Often, a child's distress and inner turmoil manifests in certain signs and symptoms or behavioral problems. This leaflet has been developed to help you to spot those signs and symptoms.

# Signs and symptoms

Below is a list of some of the most common signs and symptoms of trauma in children who have been exposed to war. These may differ across various age groups, and children may present some but not all of them.

In most cases, the symptoms develop during the first month after a traumatic event. But in a minority of cases, there may be a delay of months or even years before symptoms start to appear.

It's also important to consider that children respond differently to traumatic events. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to respond. There can be huge differences in children's stress reactions to what may seem from the outside to be similar experiences.

## Anxiety and excessive fears

- Many children who have experienced the trauma of war show signs of anxiety. This could manifest in several ways. Perhaps your child seems more 'on edge'? Or much more dependent on you than normal? Maybe they physically cling to you or other family members more and are fearful of being left alone. They may also be afraid of sleeping in the dark or have frequent nightmares. They may also seem more fearful or worried that bad things might happen to them or other people, or develop new fears or worries.
- Other signs of anxiety could include agoraphobia (a fear of being outside, particularly in crowded places), and panic attacks.

Here are  
some of the  
most common  
signs:

## Avoidance or 'shutting down'

- One coping mechanism that children sometimes use to try to avoid being reminded of the traumatic event is avoidance. Perhaps when you try to gently raise the topic of the war or your previous life at home, your child avoids the topic, walks away or 'shuts down' (becomes non-communicative).
- Children with this coping mechanism may avoid people or places that remind them of the trauma, show a change in their feelings and behavior when they're around them, or avoid talking to anyone about their experience.

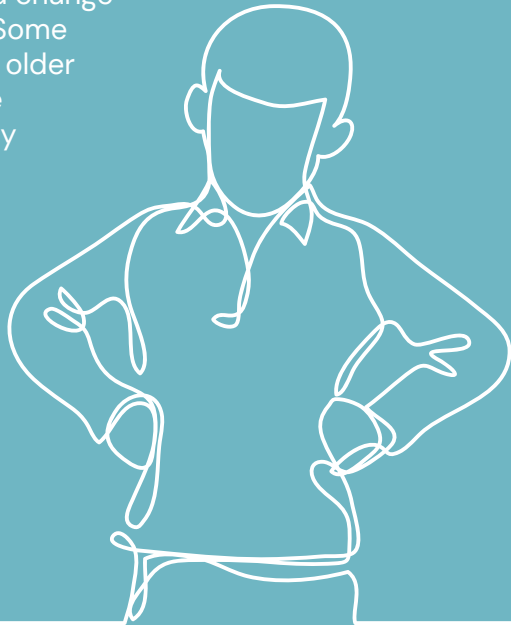
## Depression

- Depression is common among children who have experienced the trauma of war. Like anxiety, it can manifest in many ways. Your child may experience continuous feelings of sadness and hopelessness. They may have fatigue or low energy. They may have a negative view of themselves or their life, saying things like "I don't do anything well", "I'm bad", or believe that things will turn out bad for them in the future.
- Perhaps they seem detached or have trouble engaging or concentrating, or simply do not enjoy the things they used to enjoy doing? They may erupt in sudden vocal outbursts or crying. Or you may notice they have significant changes in appetite, either increased or decreased.



## Changed behaviors

- You should also look out for marked changes in behavior. This could be expressed in many different ways, particularly among children of different ages.
- In younger children, it may be a case of playing less or focusing their play time on the traumatic event, over and over again. Some may change their toilet habits. Others may become much less or more active than usual, or constantly ask to go home when out.
- In older children, they may spend more time alone, or on online or on their phones, or you may notice changes in eating habits or in language (for example, they may speak only with certain people).
- For teenage or older children, you may see more shows of delinquency, bullying, or even drug and alcohol use.
- Childhood trauma is also known to have a link to deliberate self-harm.
- There are many other ways a change in behavior could manifest. Some children may act younger or older than they actually are. Some may become more physically aggressive. Any difference in behavior that is markedly different to before the traumatic event could be important.



## “Survivor’s guilt”

- Survivor’s guilt is when a person has feelings of guilt because they survived a life-threatening situation when others did not. It is common among those who have experienced war, including in children.
- Your child may question why they escaped death while others (perhaps even friends or relatives) lost their lives. They may also wonder whether there was something that they could or should have done to help.



## Physical symptoms

Children who have been through traumatic experiences may show physiological reactions such as heart pounding, nausea and vomiting, or loss of bowel or bladder control. Other physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, dizziness and chest pains are quite common.

## ‘Hyperarousal’

- Unlike depression and its associated low energy, hyperarousal is a feeling of always being “on edge” and finding it very hard to relax. Perhaps you have noticed your child is particularly irritable, with constant angry outbursts?
- Or perhaps they have problems sleeping and difficulty concentrating or staying focused on one thing?

## Self help and support in family and community

# How you can help your Child

There are steps you can take as a parent or carer to support your child during times of trauma (The advice below is, in part, adapted from SAMHSA's page [Recognizing and Treating Child Traumatic Stress](#)).

- **Give constant assurance that your child is safe.** You can provide practical examples of what you are doing to ensure their safety at home and school and provide reassurance that they will never be placed in the same traumatic situation again.
- **Explain that your child is not responsible for what happened.** Survivor's guilt is common, even in children (see Signs and Symptoms). Provide reassurance that events were completely out of their control.
- **Be patient.** There is no way of knowing how long it will take your child to heal. Every child is different. Some recover quickly, others take many years. Remain supportive and try not to get frustrated if you are not seeing progress.
- **Be ready to talk when they are.** Many children who have been through trauma will not want to discuss it (see Avoidance in Signs and Symptoms). Others may focus on the traumatic event to an almost unhealthy degree. Keep the lines of communication open. Give them space to talk about how they feel.
- **Promote healthy behavior.** Sleep, diet and exercise can all contribute significantly to mental health. Ensure your child gets enough sleep, eats a balanced diet, and encourage them to play or take part in physical activities, preferably outside. Also, try to create calming routines to help them self-soothe, for example an evening bath, bedtime stories, listening to calming music.

- **Try mindfulness techniques.** Mindfulness can be a valuable asset for trauma survivors. Mindfulness can enhance present-moment awareness, increase self-compassion, and strengthen a person's

ability to self-regulate—all important skills that support trauma recovery. There are mindfulness apps available for children (See further reading and resources).

- **Help your child connect with friends.** If you feel they are ready, try to coordinate some time with children the same age.



Be ready to talk when they are

# Further reading and resources

## WHO

- [Doing What Matters in Times of Stress](#) (various language versions, also available in Ukrainian)

## UNICEF

- [Advice for Parents During Wartime](#) (in English or Ukrainian)
- [How to Support a Teenager in a Crisis](#) (in English or Ukrainian)
- [Games for Stress Relief in Children](#) (in English or Ukrainian)

## Sumy Regional Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education

- [How to Help a Child Who Is under Stress](#) (in Ukrainian)

## HelpGuide

- [Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events](#)

## Child Mind Institute

- [Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)

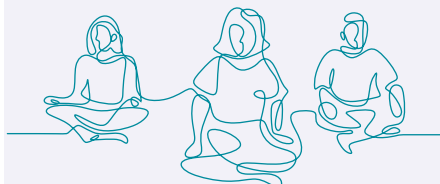
Tips on helping children to cope with war and traumatic events (resources in English, unless stated otherwise)

## Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

- [Tips for Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)

## Meditation and mindfulness apps

- **New Horizon:** [Meditation & Sleep Stories](#)
- **Headspace:** [Meditation for Kids](#)
- **Smiling Mind:** [Meditation for all ages](#)
- **DreamyKid:** [Kids Meditation App](#)



# Where to get help – specialized services

Remember, the traumatic event your child has experienced is not your fault!

You should seek professional help to provide psychological support if:

- You are concerned or unsure about how your child is coping
- You are not coping yourself
- Your child has severe symptoms or things are not settling

This could be a therapist who specializes in childhood trauma. If you are unsure where to find

support, a good place to start is your local doctor or health clinic.

And finally, it is important to state that the traumatic event was not your fault. Some parents unfairly blame themselves. But there was nothing you could have done about it. By reading this leaflet you are taking a positive step to helping your child. If you need support now, please do seek it out.

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Psychological trauma is an invisible wound, affecting all aspects of a child's life. Some wounds heal on their own over time, others need additional support to fully recover. Helping a child get through difficult times, and restore and develop coping skills is the best thing we can do for their future psychological well-being.

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