



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

Children's Mental Health Division

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) FACT SHEET

- **POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)** is an anxiety disorder that some children/adolescents might develop after experiencing or seeing a frightening or dangerous event (e.g., violence, natural disaster, accident, abuse, etc.) that overwhelms their ability to cope.
- Depending upon the type of event they have experienced, between 5% and 63% of children exposed to a traumatic event develop **PTSD**.
- **PTSD** symptoms can vary by age and affect all areas of a child's life – home, work, school, and social life.

CLINICAL SYMPTOMS	WHAT DOES A PARENT/CAREGIVER SEE?
Re-experiencing Symptoms	Flashbacks (reliving the trauma as if it was happening again); bad dreams; frightening thoughts; acting out the scary event during play
Avoidance Symptoms	Refusing to go places, do things, or see things that remind them of the experience; appearing sad or showing fewer emotions than before the experience; worrying; not wanting to engage in activities they used to enjoy; forgetting how or being unable to talk; having trouble remembering the scary event; guilt about surviving or not stopping event in time
Hyperarousal Symptoms	Easily startled; irritable or increasingly argumentative; difficulty sleeping; bedwetting when they have had control before; destructive behavior; thoughts of revenge

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES are treatments that have been shown through clinical research to produce positive outcomes for children and their families.

The most common effective treatment strategies for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are:

- **Psychoeducation**
- **Exposure**
- **Cognitive Processing**
- **Narrative**
- **Relaxation**
- **Personal Safety Skills**



Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) treatment strategy descriptions:

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation is teaching children and their caretakers about their mental illness. The purpose is to help children and their families understand how the illness affects them, what kind of activities or treatment might help, and that there are others who have similar problems. This type of education helps them understand what will happen in the treatment sessions and how long the treatment might take. They will also learn what role the parent, the therapist, and the child will play in the treatment, and that they will be a team that will work on problems together. Psychoeducation for trauma might include safety planning and education about appropriate physical boundaries, depending on the type of trauma experienced.

Exposure

Children exposed to traumatic events might develop ongoing physical and psychological symptoms. Exposure is a technique that helps the child overcome distressing thoughts and feelings related to their experiences. A therapist usually starts with indirect ways to help the child stay calm while thinking about a distressing topic. This might include practicing relaxation while talking about the trauma. Exposure for treating trauma is different than for other anxiety disorders because the goal is to expose the child to memories, situations, or activities they are avoiding, but not to the actual traumatic event itself.

Cognitive Processing

Cognitive processing is used to teach children about how the way they think about things can affect how they feel, and how they feel can affect how they behave. Cognitive methods might be used to help children understand how their thoughts are related to their moods and behaviors. They are taught strategies to help them check the accuracy of their thoughts and replace negative or unhelpful thoughts with more positive or helpful thoughts.

Narrative

This strategy involves the development and review of a narrative or story about one's life events in a safe, calm, reassuring context that promotes gradually increasing depth of processing, prompted coping, and construction of meaning about the events. This should always be done with the assistance of a mental health professional. When treating trauma, the narrative also acts as a type of exposure.

Relaxation

Ongoing anxiety or stress can make children irritable and can interfere with concentration. Relaxation methods help children reduce stress. These exercises include muscle-relaxation, breathing exercises, imagery, meditation, and similar activities. Some methods are meant to be used away from daily activities. Others are useful in the moment.

Personal Safety Skills

Personal safety skills training focuses on helping the child enhance his or her future personal safety. This can include education about attending to one's sense of danger, body ownership issues (e.g., "good touch – bad touch"), risks involved with keeping secrets, how to ask for help when feeling unsafe, and identification of other high-risk situations.