



Mental Health support for children after conflict or disaster (UK)

Psychological ‘first aid’ starts with helping to ensure that people’s basic needs are met. This means practical help or ‘signposting’ to where they can be safe, find water, food, shelter, get medical treatment etc.

Use smiles, mime and gesture, pictures, play, music...to communicate if there are language difficulties.

Children need to be with someone who can care for and support them- if they are alone, **link** them with someone appropriate.

It is **normal** after conflict, disaster or forced displacement for children to experience distress including feeling very frightened, anxious and sad, difficulty sleeping and bad dreams, having strong and difficult memories including ‘flashbacks’ (when they feel as if a traumatic event is still happening); difficulty concentrating on other things, not wanting to be separated from a parent /carer, crying easily, irritable or angry outbursts, rapid mood swings, and behaviour difficulties, or being unusually quiet and withdrawn.

Some children will also be grieving the loss of a family member.

Parents who are also coping with loss and displacement may need support to meet the emotional needs of their children at this time.

Children need:

-To know that they are **safe** now,

-**Reassurance** that the conflict /disaster will end, that life will not always be like this, that they will have a home again, go back to school again ...even if this happens in a new place.

-**Social support** – from family, other children, teachers, religious leaders, NGO staff...

-**Familiar routines** when possible– e.g. school, or a regular time for some school work, regular bed-times and a bed-time story etc.

-Opportunities to ‘**let off steam**’ and release some of the tension, to run around together, play football, tag, keep-up-the-balloon, dance to favourite music, sing, clapping games..

-Opportunities for **play**. Children may play out difficult events – this can be a way of working through what has happened.

-Opportunities to **talk, led by the child** about what has and is happening with parents or carers **if** they want to, and **when** they are ready. Try to answer questions as appropriate for the child's age and development.

-Opportunities and materials for **art**- to express fears, bad memories, dreams and hopes for the future- or just to enjoy themselves. Let children draw/ paint what they want, and talk about their pictures **if they want**. Painting simple patterns can be a good place to start. For some children the memories of what they have experienced are too painful and intense to express, for these children – and at the end of any art session - suggest children think about somewhere they would love to be, or live, *in the future* – this may be serious wishes for a new house, or fantasies – eg living on the moon... Also, Play-dough or salt-dough help children express and regulate their emotions.

-Opportunities for **fun**, and to **escape** from the difficulties in play, games, stories, art, video games, films and videos etc.

- **Help to relax**: Show children how to take a few deep breaths, scrunch all their muscles up tightly...then give themselves a gentle shake to release tension and relax- especially before going to sleep. (*See next page for more details about relaxation*)

Squeeze and Hug!! Explain: Squeezing something can help you feel calmer if you are stressed - something small and squishy like a little ball. Or you can **squeeze your thumb** like this: **Demonstrate**:

Close the fingers of one hand around the thumb of your other hand and squeeze it- (but not too hard!) Ask the children to practice.

Explain: And you can gently **squeeze** and **hug your arms (near the top)**. It's almost like someone giving you a hug. (This can help children when they feel upset too.)

Demonstrate: Cross your arms over your chest, hold and gently but firmly squeeze your upper arms with your hands for a few seconds.

Butterfly hug is helpful for calming especially before sleep: cross your hands over and place them, palms down, on your chest, linking your thumbs to make a butterfly shape. Slowly tap one hand then the other firmly, near your shoulders, while you breathe slowly in ...and out...and think of something nice...(These activities also help children who **dissociate**- feel numb, or out of touch with the present – feel more grounded and present.)

Note on IT /social media: They help children stay in touch with friends and family and provide entertainment and education. But a never-ending stream of news and posts, photos, etc related to the conflict or disaster also fuels children's fears and anxiety. Children, teens – and parents too- will benefit from trying to **limit** their viewing of news etc related to the conflict/ disaster.

And it is important for adults/ parents to try to have conversations that may be distressing, or watch distressing news, away from young children.

As time passes, children need:

-Support to feel **hope for the future**,

-**Opportunities to make sense of what has happened** by talking with an adult who listens, and answers questions in a truthful but age-appropriate way, or through art, drama, play, or stories- including of course making their own stories.

Simple 'tools' for anxious children

These 'tools' can be used with individual children/ teens/ adults, and groups when they are safe. They also help reduce stress for parents /carers /staff. (Include your own favourite anxiety tools if you prefer).

1. Very Quick Relaxation ('Shake away'!) Say: "Take a deep breath in... clench your fists... tighten the muscles in your arms.. raise your shoulders...hold!...Now relax- Blow the air slowly out as if you are blowing out a candle, and let your shoulders, arms and hands drop down...now give your arms a gentle shake...shake your arms gently about, wobble your legs around.. shake your head gently from side to side... until all the stress has gone away.

2. The script below explains how to teach 3 powerful tools for anxiety: Deep Breaths, Special Place (Or Safe Place), and Relaxation. You may use the full script (which is designed for children,) or start at the 'Relaxation' section. Use your own words if you prefer and adjust the script for the age of the children:

Talk calmly and slowly: "Move around so you have a little space around you. Sit comfortably. Look at the floor just in front of you, or you can close your eyes if you like. Think of somewhere you would love to be, somewhere you feel completely safe, and happy, and relaxed. It might be inside, or outside. It can be a place you imagine in your head, or somewhere you have heard about, or seen in a video. It is somewhere you would love to be, where you feel really happy. **[Pause] (If a child has recently been displaced or bereaved and might be upset if they think about the home they have lost, ask them to think of an imaginary place).** "You might be sitting or lying down, relaxing, or you might be doing something you really enjoy, like playing football, or dancing...**[Pause]**. This is your special place, where you feel completely safe and happy...Keep looking at the floor, or close your eyes.... Now, in your mind, look around your special place. See the colours of everything around you. **[Pause]**

"What can you hear? Birds maybe, or music, or friends talking and laughing? Think how it feels in your special place. Maybe you can smell something nice too - your favourite food or scent perhaps.

This is your Special Place where you can go when you want to relax. You always feel happy, and safe, and calm here. **[Pause]**

“Now, go on thinking about being in your Special Place, about how lovely and safe you feel... As I slowly count to 3, take a **Deep Breath** in -down into your stomach, so your tummy/ stomach swells out like a puppy's: 1 - 2 - 3; now hold it (1-) 2 - 3, now let your breathe out slowly as I count to 5:(1 - 2 -) 3 - 4 - 5.

Let's do that again: deep breathe in 1 - 2 - 3; hold it ... 2 - 3, Slowly let your breath out... 3 - 4 - 5. **[Pause]** Repeat for 1 or 2 more breaths.

“Now still in your Special Place, we are going to **relax**...first, tighten up all your muscles in turn: your feet...and legs...now your stomach...and your back...now tighten your arms...and shoulders...and fists...and scrunch yourself up into a tight little ball [For young children: like a little tortoise, all curled up in your shell]- hold it - And now let your muscles **relax**...slowly uncurl and shake your arms and legs out gently. **[Pause]**

“Now take one more deep breath in: 1 - 2 - 3, hold it ... 2 - 3; and out: .. 3 - 4 - 5. **[Pause]**. Now you are going to leave your Special Place- **[Pause]** And open your eyes, or sit up, **[Pause]**, And move back into the group/ come back into this room where we are now... Well done!

3.Safe/Special Place Object or Picture Invite the child to choose (or find) a small object eg a little toy, or a pebble or stone, an interesting twig, a coloured bottle top, a small seed pod, a scrap of fabric, a button etc...to keep with them. The object should look or feel soothing, calming, happy,and *remind* them of their Special Place. (Or they can make and paint small shapes from clay/ dough to keep, or draw a picture of how they imagine their Special Place.) Holding and /or looking at their special place object or picture will help them get into their safe/special place and relax faster.

4. Worry-time/ worry box. Explain: Set a few minutes, before you go to bed, to talk about all the things you are worrying about to someone older in your family, or a friend/carere, who you trust. Talking about your worries really helps. (*Some children prefer to tell their worries to a favourite toy, cuddly animal, superhero, angel..; they could draw or make a simple model with salt dough, scraps of fabric etc.to tell their worries to.*)

Explain...Then tell your mind you have dealt with your worries for today! If they start to come back, **say and think ‘STOP!!’**

Then think a good, positive thought instead: Something that has gone well, something good, or funny, or something that you have managed to do today.

OR: Quickly think of your main worries, one by one, and pretend to put each worry in a **little worry box or worry bag** (real or imaginary). Do this before you try to go to sleep each night. Then you have dealt with your worries. Next, think of something **nice** instead, or in your mind go into your Special Place, and relax.

5.Blow-Away your worries: (Explain that you know many of the big worries won't really go away quickly– but this helps us cope with our worries) **Say:** Take a deep slow breath in 1-2-3; hold it: and let your breath out slowly: (1-2)-3-4-5 – as if you're slowly blowing a stream of bubbles.... Let's do that again. Breathe in 1-2-3, hold it-breath out (1-2)-3-4-5. This time, as you breathe slowly out, **see** your worries float

away in the air like bubbles. Ready? Deep breath in, 1-2-3, hold it- slowly let your breath out (1-2)-3-4-5- **and watch those worries float away...** (Repeat for one or two more breaths). If you can, use **soap/bubble mix** to make real bubbles for the children.

6.Grounding activities: To help a child calm, and stay 'in the present'. The aim is for each child to have a range of sensory things and activities that help them stay calm and in the present, and not become overwhelmed by bad memories, or stress /panic. Also helpful for a child who dissociates due to trauma/ traumatic memories. Practice with the child, so they can use their favourite grounding activities at any time when they become anxious, stressed, or panicky:

Help the child choose one or two **smells** (eg lavender, rosemary, lemon, a favourite spice or flower or soap?), and/or **tastes** (orange juice? Cola? Mint chewing gum?) and/or **sounds** (their favourite music?), and/or something to **squeeze** (see above) or **hold** (a favourite toy?). They choose 1 or 2 from this list to have with them, to use to help them calm if they start to feel very stressed/ panicky, while they take a few slow deep breaths. *Also practice these calm 'grounding' activities:*

7.Calm Counting Say: Look at the floor or ground around you. Start looking at and counting all the different things you can see. Start with your **feet**: 1,2, then (slowly) every twig, pebble, leaf, on the ground around you. Look at each thing carefully as you count. (If you are inside they count things that are on the floor - chairs maybe, a rug, toys, shoes, baskets)...,try to count at least 10 things slowly... then move onto:

Calm Colours: Say: Now look around you at all the **colours** you can see. What colours can you see in the sky... on the ground or floor..., on your clothes? Count the colours you can see. Think which colour you like best. Look at this colour. Think how nice it looks. Now take 2 slow deep breaths in while you count 1-2-3, hold 1-2-3, then out 1-2-3-4-5, like we've practiced.

8.Stopping difficult thoughts: Say 'STOP! - and do something nice! Explain: When you are very stressed /anxious or sad, you often can't think of anything else. To feel better, it's important to stop these thoughts going round and round in your head. When this happens say '**STOP!**' to yourself. Practice shouting '**STOP!**' to worrying thoughts with the child. **Say:** Then – do something **nice** instead! What are your favourite things to do?

Help the child think of a few enjoyable activities they can use for **Distraction** from worrying /difficult thoughts e.g. sing favourite songs; play a game, talk to a friend...even counting backwards!

Special Supporters Activity: Displaced Children often feel isolated and alone. This activity helps refugee children to feel stronger, more confident and 'connected'. We all need people who we can trust, who give us support, and look out /look after us. Help the child think **of two or three people...** in their family? a neighbour? a teacher? a sibling? a friend?... who they could go to for **help or support-** if they need it) **Explain:** We can deal with little problems and things that annoy us on our own - eg. when your brother borrows your t-shirt without asking - but if we have **big**

worries or problems, or feel really anxious, low or sad, we need to tell someone and get some help and support...

Hand out paper and pencils/colours. The children can turn away from the group and work in private if they wish. - Ask the group to each draw a large circle or a cloud shape. They draw themselves in the middle and around them they draw or write the names of all the people they feel they trust, who they could talk to about a problem /worry, and who would help/support them. - Remind them that different people can help with different problems: They might play music with a friend if they're feeling low /sad, but a teacher/adult neighbour could help with e.g. finding a job, or a college course. Move around the group to help/prompt children to identify Special Supporters. (Note: some children may have no one they trust /can rely on where they live.) Remind older children that they can be great supporters for each other. **Help each child to think of at least 2 or 3 supporters** (*This activity can be done without paper: children can choose small stones/ twigs / scraps of fabric to place in a circle around them to represent Special Supporters.*)

Some positive thinking: (NOT for children who are recently bereaved) Explain: When we're very worried and anxious or feeling low /sad, our minds are so full of our worries and problems that we forget that there are some good things in our own lives too, things we are glad about. It **really** helps to remember things that we are thankful for and glad about – even if this seems difficult:

3 Good Things activity: In pairs or small groups ask children to list in turn, 3 good, or nice, or funny things that have happened recently, or things that they are proud of doing. They can be very small things – eg finding a pretty button, seeing a funny-shaped cloud -or bigger things eg being glad /thankful that I'm with my brother....

Thinking of 3 positive things before going to sleep each evening can help prevent depression, and builds resilience.

Making simple plans

After conflict or a disaster, children often feel helpless, and as if they have no control over what happens to them – this is a frightening feeling, especially for older children and teens. Learning to make a simple plan to help with a small issue or problem builds confidence and hope for the future- (even if much of what happens **is** out of their control.)

Help the children decide on a problem(s) they want to work on. Give out paper and pencils/pens or use a chalk/ white board. Be ready to suggest an appropriate problem/ worry for the group. (*In unsafe or 'difficult' situations, making a group plan so the children feel they will be **safer** will help boost confidence*)

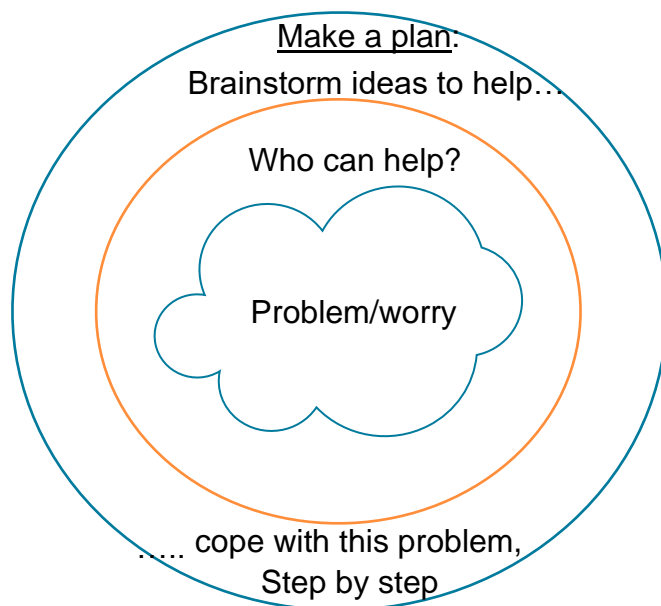
Show the diagram below, or draw it. Help them brainstorm ideas to make a plan to deal with this problem:

-Children write the worry /problem in the **centre**.

-In the **middle** circle, put: people to ask for help with the plan; who can provide support from their 'Special Supporters' group.

-Put ideas for how to achieve the plan, step by step, in the outside circle,.

-Prompt them to use Deep Breaths etc to keep calm while thinking about the problem



-Help the children arrange the ideas in

small steps: **first** do this, **next** we do this, **then** this....

Help the children **see** themselves or **imagine** doing each step successfully, while using Deep Breaths etc if needed, to keep calm.

Encourage and help teenagers to make a few simple plans in small groups to help themselves **eg** Practice a new language, walk to school together so they feel safer, start a football or dance team...or just to have fun.

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Helping children with hard, sad memories: (for small groups) Note: Not for children who are severely traumatised or have been diagnosed with PTSD: (These children need specialist treatment e.g, with CATT).

Children must be safe. They must know and trust the activity leaders and be able to use basic grounding tools to manage anxiety (see above). If possible play some favourite, calming music quietly during this activity.

Introduction. Explain: Sometimes a memory of something that happened in the past can make you feel really scared now. Eg. Sam * feels really scared, and his heart beats very fast when he hears any loud bang - like when a door slams shut - because it sounds like when guns were firing all around him in the war. Sometimes he feels he is in the war again- although he is actually safe now, away from the war (** You can change the details so the story is appropriate for the children you are supporting – but do not include traumatic details*) Maybe some horrible things have happened for you, and things that remind you of them still make you feel really sad, or really scared- or as if the bad things were still happening? **Explain:** We're going to do a drawing activity which will help the bad memories feel less strong. Drawing your bad memories is hard, so if you feel you are getting upset, take some Deep Breaths, have some juice, (chew gum, squeeze a ball...or other grounding activities that you

have ready), Count Colours in the room... or you can quickly go to your Safe/Special Place. Then when you feel calmer, go back and draw a bit more. When we've finished, we'll do something nice /fun. (*Hand out paper and coloured pens/ crayons*)

1) Say: Think of something bad or sad that has happened, something that you'd like to leave behind you, and draw as much about it as you can... *Encourage the children to draw as much as they can of some of the sad, bad experiences, on one side of a piece of paper.* (If the child has had many difficult experiences, ask them to draw **one** first.) Discuss how they could make marks to represent noises, or smells.. etc (eg a 'starburst' for gunshot). Give encouragement and praise because they are doing something hard. Monitor the children carefully and step in with a grounding activity if a child becomes very upset. Then encourage them to draw a bit more...(What happened next? Who else was there?...) Keep reminding the group that the bad/ sad things they are drawing are **over**, in the past...that they are **safe** now, with you, with their friends...Children may want to talk to you about their drawings but this is not necessary, do not ask about what happened to them.

2) Say: When you have drawn as much as possible for now, turn over the piece of paper and draw where you were straight after the bad thing(s), when it was over, and when you knew you were OK/ had survived. Give lots of encouragement. **3) Praise** the group for doing something difficult. Remind them again that these bad things are in the past, that they are safe now. Remind them of some good/new/fun things they are doing now...(even if life is still hard). **Explain:** Now you have drawn some of those hard memories, and managed to stay calm so well, the memories should soon not seem so scary. **Explain** that you will keep the drawings safe, and they can add to their drawings another time if they wish.

4) End this session with something hopeful and enjoyable! A favourite game, singing etc, or a fun drawing activity eg ask the children to draw something they wish for, somewhere they would like to be/go, or something they really like from their life now.

Many of the emotional and behaviour difficulties which are normal reactions to conflict, disaster or displacement should gradually settle when life becomes more stable. But many children will continue to feel very anxious, and some will experience traumatic grief. For a number of children, the symptoms of psychological trauma will continue and they will require specialist treatment for PTSD. Children and teens with latent vulnerabilities (eg children with problems and difficulties in their life before the conflict or disaster) are at particular risk of developing longer-term mental health difficulties.

*ACT International provides training for childcare professionals and volunteers to support the mental health of children who are anxious, grieving or coping with difficult memories after conflict, disaster, or forced displacement: **the 'Anxiety and Resilience Programme'**, and **'Children's Accelerated Trauma Treatment' (CATT)**, for children and adolescents with PTSD. We also provide Children's Rights training.*

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