



## PTSD Awareness for Children's Aid Workers

Visit [www.firstrespondersfirst.ca](http://www.firstrespondersfirst.ca) for more information on PTSD Prevention

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is a mental health condition caused by witnessing or experiencing actual or threatened death, serious injury or violence. Being affected by these types of events is normal, however if the thoughts or memories of these events start to seriously affect the life of the person long after the event, that person could be experiencing PTSD. Signs that someone may be experiencing PTSD include nightmares, uncontrollable memories, persistent fear and severe anxiety

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### CAUSES OF PTSD

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It is believed that PTSD is caused by a complex mix of life experiences, including the amount and severity of trauma you have experienced since early childhood; the way your brain regulates the chemicals and hormones your body releases in response to stress; and inherited mental health risks such as an increased risk of anxiety or depression and inherited aspects of your personality or temperament.

### RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING PTSD

People are more at risk for developing PTSD if they:

- Have a job that increases your likelihood of being exposed to traumatic events
- Experience intense or long lasting trauma
- Feel horror, helplessness or extreme fear
- See people get killed or hurt
- Experienced other trauma earlier in life, including childhood abuse or neglect

- Have other medical problems such as anxiety or depression
- Lack a good support system of family or friends
- Deal with extra stress after the event such as loss of a loved one, pain or injury, or loss of job or home
- Have biological (blood) relatives with mental health problems including PTSD or depression.

A study done in 2000 by the University of Toronto<sup>1</sup> identified the following stresses that CAS workers are exposed to as part of their job that put them at risk for developing PTSD or an Occupational Stress Injury, including:

- death of a child in service due to accident or abuse while on caseload
- death of an adult child
- threats or assault
- threats or injury to other staff and
- other serious or critical events

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## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

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### INTRUSIVE MEMORIES

These are also called re-experiencing symptoms, these memories can start from the persons own thoughts, or can be triggered by words, object or situations that are reminders of the traumatic event.



These include:

- Recurring, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- reliving the event as if it were happening again,
- Upsetting dreams about the event, and
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions (heart racing, hands sweating) to something that reminds you of the even

### HYPER-AROUSAL

Hyper-arousal symptoms are changes in emotional reactions usually constant and can make a person feel stressed, angry, overwhelmed and “on guard.”



These include”

- Irritability, feeling tense or “on guard,”
- Difficulty sleeping,
- Angry outbursts or aggressive behaviours,
- Being on constant guard for danger,
- Feelings of overwhelming guilt or shame,
- Self-destructive behaviours,
- Trouble concentrating or sleeping, and
- Being easily startled or frightened

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<sup>1</sup>

## PERSISTANT AVOIDANCE

Persistent Avoidance symptoms may cause a person to change their routine, including avoiding things that remind them of the event such as though, feelings, reminders and external stimuli (triggers).



These include:

- Trying to avoid thinking about the event,
- Avoiding places, objects, activities or people that remind you of the event,
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past,
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships.
- Memory problems including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event,

## NEGATIVE COGNITION AND MOOD

Negative cognitions and mood include symptoms such as distorted sense of blame, estrangement from others, markedly diminished interest and an inability to remember key aspects of the event.



These include:

- Distorted sense of blame,
- Estrangement from others,
- Increased negative feelings about self or others,
- Feeling emotionally numb or inability to experience positive or negative emotions,
- Feeling hopeless about the future,
- Markedly diminished interest and an inability to remember key aspects of the event

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## WHAT PTSD MIGHT LOOK LIKE AT WORK

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Each individual will have their own responses and coping skills in reaction to traumatic events, but below there are some examples of how PTSD may manifest at work.

- Trouble remembering or concentrating on tasks
- Difficulty managing time or completing tasks
- Feelings of fear and anxiety about completing usual duties
- Unreasonable reactions to normal situations
- Anger outburst and interpersonal conflict
- Excessive fatigue and abnormal sleep patterns
- Inability to cope with stressful events
- Avoidance of certain job duties that they were comfortable previously performing
- Increased alcohol use after work
- Performance deterioration, lateness or absenteeism

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## WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

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A person should see a Psychologist or Physician if the symptoms they are experiencing last for more than one month and they are experiencing at least:<sup>2</sup> ONE intrusive memory symptom, TWO hyper-arousal symptoms, and THREE persistent avoidance or negative cognition or mood symptoms.

### CHECKLIST

Directions: Read each of the statements below. If you have been experiencing these symptoms for more than on month mark the box at the beginning of the statement. When you are done you take it to your doctor or share with your supervisor so that they can help you access the support you need.

#### INTRUSIVE MEMORY SYMPTOMS

- recurring, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- reliving the event as if it were happening again
- upsetting dreams about the event
- severe emotional distress or physical reactions (heart racing, hands sweating) to something that reminds you of the event.

#### PERSISTANT AVOIDANCE & NEGATIVE COGNITION SYMPTOMS

- Trying to avoid thinking about the event,
- Avoiding places, objects, activities or people that remind you of the event,
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past,
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships.
- Memory problems including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- Distorted sense of blame,
- Estrangement from others,
- Increased negative feelings about self or others,
- Feeling emotionally numb or inability to experience positive or negative emotions,
- Feeling hopeless about the future,
- Markedly diminished interest and an inability to remember key aspects of the event

#### HYPER-AROUSAL SYMPTOMS

- irritability, feeling tense or “on guard”
- difficulty sleeping
- angry outbursts or aggressive behaviours,
- being on constant guard for danger,
- feelings of overwhelming guilt or shame,
- self-destructive behaviours,
- trouble concentrating or sleeping
- being easily startled or frightened

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<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Mental Health, 2016