

Psychological Support for Children in a Time of Unbearable Tragedy and Human Loss

As Sri Lankans, we have experienced mass violence on many occasions during the last few decades. Parents today, were exposed to the cruelty of the war as children in real life and through media. However, today's children in Sri Lanka may never have experienced such atrocities due to the relatively stable and peaceful past decade.

Your child would be exposed to the violence that happened in the country directly or through media, conversations of friends and family members. Child mental health research has shown that even when children are exposed indirectly, they could be significantly traumatised psychologically. Studies have shown that they may develop anger and intrusive thoughts related to the events. Hopefully, many children would be supported by understanding parents and caring teachers.

Features that could be seen in children and adolescents after experiencing psychological trauma

- ❖ Sleep disturbance and nightmares
- ❖ Difficulty to concentrate on school work
- ❖ Persistent sorrow
- ❖ A fear that these incidents would recur
- ❖ Prefers to be alone
- ❖ Repetitive, intrusive memories and images related to the violence
- ❖ Lack of enjoyment in their usual activities
- ❖ Persistent headache and other bodily aches that are not physically caused
- ❖ Easily startled and feeling being 'on edge'

How should parents support their children?

The psychological support should be appropriate to the age and the cognitive developmental stage of the child. A general guide is shown below. However, it needs to be catered to the understanding and temperament of your child.

2 to 6 years

Try your best not to expose these young children to news of these events. It may be better to discuss these violent events after they have gone to sleep. If they are not aware of these, you may not have to introduce new information. If they are aware and inquisitive, you

need to tell them that they are safe, the family is safe, and you would do your best to protect them.

7 to 12 years

You need to be vigilant whether your child has the above features of psychological trauma. Please check their understanding prior to explaining to them. You would have to decide and choose wisely of the information you would provide to them. You might have to exclude many gruesome details. Listen carefully and attentively to them. If you listen, they may have a lot to say. Please be honest when you give them information as you don't want to lose their trust on you as a reliable information source. Clearly tell them that the culprits are never heroes and discuss potential sensationalism. However, be careful not to encourage stereotypes.

Adolescents

They may already know a lot. However, their sources of information may be unreliable, such as social media, rumours from peers and specific websites. Listen to what they know and explain kindly. Help them to understand that there is a deeper socio-cultural meaning of these events. Support older adolescents to look beyond what is shown on the news. Please do not encourage pessimism and negativity about the country. For example, do not say "this country will never be safe". Instil hope of a stable country and a safer society. Depending on the security status of the country, allow them to return to their usual routines quickly.

Where can we get help?

Your closest teaching hospital, general hospital or base hospital would have a **Child and Adolescent Guidance Clinic** or a psychiatric clinic. You could obtain support and guidance from these units.

**This was prepared for the benefit
of Sri Lankan children of today and tomorrow!**

Concept and Advice,

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