

ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY PROFESSIONALS



A resource for professionals and Paraprofessionals working with
war-affected children

Helping children and teens cope with war

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PROFESSIONALS

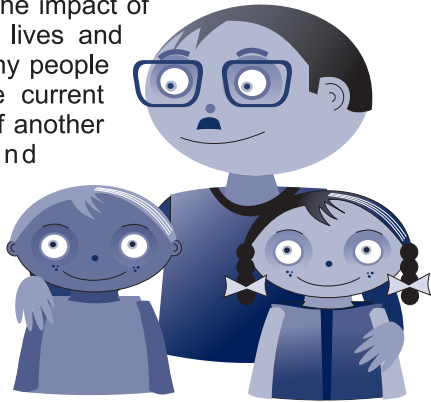
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In the aftermath of conflict and wars in Gaza, both adults and children struggled with the impact of damage, loss, and chaos in their lives and communities. Still traumatized, many people don't feel ready to cope with the current conflict situation or the insecurity of another war happening. Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable; they have not had a sufficient period of stability, safety, and trust in which to recover from the effects of the last war in Gaza. If the impact of the war goes unnoticed or is minimized, children and teens may not receive the emotional support they still need to fully heal. For all these reasons, they'll need extra assistance now that this situation of conflict and insecurity is upon us and painful reminders of the trauma are inescapable.



This situation poses unique and significant challenges for the mental health community in the Gaza Strip. Clinicians and paraprofessionals are charged with providing care to families and children struggling in all the ways described above, many of whom are manifesting high rates of depression, anxiety, and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of the Gaza war.

This booklet briefly summarizes the ways that the wars in Gaza could still be affecting children and teens, and reviews specific techniques to promote healing in children. These can either be used directly in your work with children and teens, or shared with parents to support them in nurturing their children.

1. CARING FOR YOURSELF

Let's consider you, the healing professional, first. Take care of yourself so you can be there to help others. It's important to take time to replenish yourself with friends, faith, music, creative outlets, and books, and other nurturing activities so you can be more fully available to the children in your care. Don't be afraid to ask for help! This is sometimes difficult for caretakers. Talk with a supportive colleague, family member or friend. Children can easily take on the anxiety of the adults in their immediate environment, therefore it's important to take care of your own reactions before helping children identify and cope with theirs. It's a difficult balance you walk, sharing your own feelings about the war while

not overwhelming children with private fears and misgivings. Make sure you're as ready as you can be by taking care of yourself first.

2. ENHANCING A SENSE OF SAFETY

Next we look at providing safety and security to children; emotional safety is a crucial component of healing.

Take active steps to protect children from painful reminders of past trauma.

Encourage parents, to the extent possible, to limit the amount of war news children see on the television or hear on the radio.

Be available to discuss the news with them from your point of view, and answer questions in a way that they can understand.

Consistently reassure them that you, their parents, and caretakers care about them, understand their feelings and needs, and will take steps to keep them safe. Provide them with hope and reassurance.

Be mindful of the impact of your conversations on children who are listening nearby. Be open about your feelings, but share especially overwhelming feelings with another adult.

a) Safety Plans

It is a priority to help children and teens establish some sense of safety and support in the midst of conflict and insecurity. Children need to know their family's evacuation plans. Have copies of community disaster guidelines on hand to discuss with children and their families. Ask children what they know about their family's plan.

"How will you know if you need to evacuate?"

"Who will come with you? Where will you go? What will your family take with them?"

"What is the one really special and important thing you would like to take with you if we need to leave?"

"You can help your family make its plan to help keep you all safe."

While we all hope evacuations won't be necessary, advance planning will both prepare children and lead to easier evacuations, if they're needed.

3. FOSTERING HEALTHY COPING SKILLS

Next, we look at behaviors and symptoms that may be observed in children as they cope with the threat of conflict or another war. The last war created real losses for families, and significant numbers of children are still grieving, unable to trust and feel safe again, and showing marked difficulty with concentration. For children struggling with abandonment, family or community violence, or unstable family situations unrelated to the war, their distress is likely compounded.

As they brace themselves for renewed conflict or another war, children and teens will show a wide range of reactions, including different thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that require attention. Understandably, many children are feeling quite scared about this situation, wondering if a next war will be as bad as the last, or convinced that it will be—or even that the destruction, pain and loss will be a thousand times worse. The amount of fear and stress will vary from child to child. Some may be afraid of one or two things, while others may be very worried about nearly every aspect of life. The possibility of another war happening, and your discussions about it, may even produce emotions about the war that had been previously buried.

In remembering the last war, children and adolescents are often on edge, confused, 'spacey,' and depressed; others have quietly withdrawn.

Grades at school are likely to have suffered, as well as their interest in doing fun activities. Other children and teens may appear very irritable and angry. They may have physical complaints such as headaches, stomachs and problems sleeping or eating. The most seriously affected may even have thoughts of self harm or suicide.

Difficult memories may appear as intrusive thoughts and/or images, smells, or an intense feeling of discomfort. Some children have stated that these memories create a huge wave of feeling that travels through the body, sometimes without warning. It's almost as if the sensations associated with the original event are happening all over again. Fearful children and teenagers may begin to avoid situations that remind them of the trauma. While this may work temporarily, it does not prepare them to deal with their problems proactively.

If fears are buried for too long, they usually come back as 'symptoms' and can be a cause of major problems. It can be cause for concern, though, when children seem trapped in the past, plagued by negative

feelings, stuck in certain memories, and not interested in things they used to enjoy.

As we all know, behaviors, feelings and thoughts are interconnected. Some behaviors in children may mask feelings of helplessness or terror; other behaviors are connected to their thoughts of “it's happening again.” The following strategies help children cope with conflict situations or the insecurity of another war happening. They will be most effective when they are sensitively tailored to meet the unique needs of each child.

a) Identifying Children's Feelings

Children don't always verbalize their feelings. The following tips can help you to identify what they're feeling.

Stay aware of changes in children's behavior, and ask parents and caregivers to keep an eye on how they are getting along with their friends. Do they seem more irritable, aggressive, or withdrawn? Look and listen actively to understand where the child is socially and emotionally.

If a child seems sad or anxious, create a private and safe environment where he or she can talk, write out, or draw about their fears or concerns. Listen closely to what they are saying to help understand their feelings. Repeat a child's words back to them to help identify what they might be feeling in that moment.

Draw pictures and play with younger children. They may not be able to articulate their feelings, but if they are allowed to 'direct the action' or have some control over an activity, their hidden concerns may emerge.

b) Supporting Children's Feelings

Enabling children to process their feelings is critical to helping them gain inner stability. This short section provides tips for exploring, supporting, and processing feelings.

Ask the child or teenager what their specific fears or concerns are, write them down, and come up with realistic ways to help address their worries.

Let them know it is normal to feel upset during this time, and that you will take steps to help them.

“What are you worried about now? How can I help you with that?”
“So you are scared that the war will happen again. I can sure understand why you are feeling that way. Thank you for telling me the truth about how you are feeling. One thing we know for sure, though, is that there isn’t a war going through this room right now...”

Help children sort through their feelings about the past war, whatever those feelings might be and to put words to their feelings. Help them begin to recognize that they may have two different feelings at once.

Introduce them to healthy ways of expressing anger, such as pounding clay, playing sports, or listening to music. Let them know that anger can be a good thing, since it can motivate a person to make positive changes.

“It is OK to feel angry. You have a lot of reasons to be angry right now. Let’s figure out ways you can let your anger out that will be helpful to you.”



Accept their feelings without judgment or criticism, and allow them to feel what they need to feel. Your child needs to know that all feelings are okay, even 'negative' ones like being nervous or feeling blue.

“You are really sad right now. Go ahead and let it out”, or
“It may be hard for you to understand what has happened. It is all right to ask me questions, and I will try to help you.”

Help children and teens heal by helping others. Encourage them to

volunteer. Children of all ages can contribute to their community's recovery.

Identify some volunteer activities that connect youth with inspiring young people from all over the country who are involved in various ways with the war recovery.

Recommend that parents and caregivers spend more time with their children and teens as a way of helping them with their feelings during this war anticipation (games, sports, art, etc.).

c) Relaxation Techniques

Next, we provide suggestions that are useful in promoting relaxation and reducing stress and tension in children and teens. These strategies have been used successfully in post-conflict settings; they can also be used on an ongoing basis to promote and maintain positive mental and physical health.

Helping Children to Relax:

When children are distressed, their bodies hold that tension. Learning to relax is at the very foundation of coping effectively with stress and anxiety.

To begin the process of relaxation, it's useful to help the child or teen identify the areas of their bodies that hold stress. Some children may need help in finding the areas of the body which seem tight or sore. You can draw a picture of the body and use different colors to represent which parts of the body feel tight or sore, those parts feel a bit relaxed, and the parts that feel really relaxed. Here are a number of techniques that can help a child to relax.

Deep Breathing:

This is a very easy and effective way to help children relax; quickly calming the body's reaction to stress.

Suggest that the child breathes in very slow, deep breaths through the nose so that their belly blows up like a balloon. Then let the air flow out slowly through the mouth, allowing the body to become more and more relaxed.

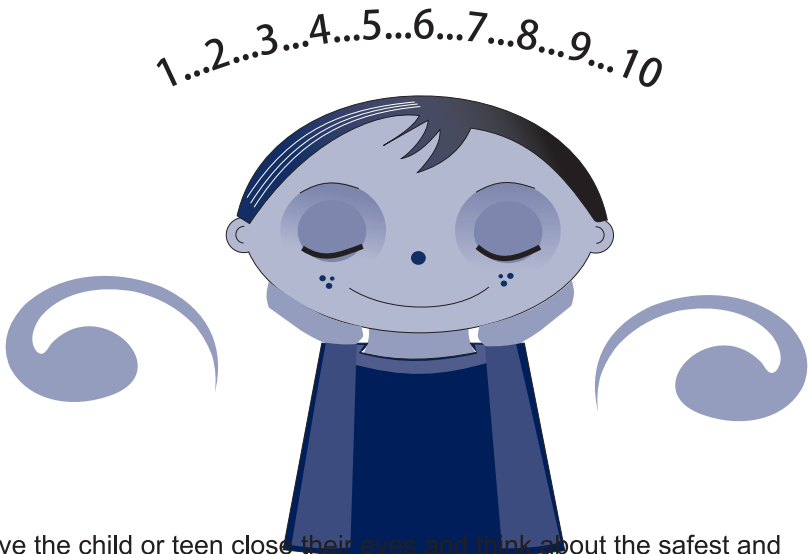
Count out ten slow, gentle breaths. Model this technique. Encourage children to breathe this way whenever they feel stressed.

Relaxing the Body:

Find a quiet, comfortable area. Encourage the child to sit back and take deep breaths. Have them tense the specific area of the body that is tight for 5 seconds, then relax it, repeating several times. You can use this method for the child's whole body from head to toe.

"Now take a deep breath and hold it while I count to five, and keep your tummy real tight, squeeze it...one...two...three...four...five. Now, breathe out through the mouth and let your tummy relax... go soft...that feels so much better now. Concentrate on feeling nice and loose and relaxed. Let the tummy stay more relaxed for a while now..."

Using Imagery:



Have the child or teen close their eyes and think about the safest and most beautiful place that they can imagine, a place that makes them feel calm and peaceful. This place can be real or imagined, indoors or outdoors. This place can be just for them, or they can have someone there who can help them feel secure.

It can be a place that they create just to help them feel better. Ask the child or teen what it might look, feel, sound and smell like in this beautiful place? Help the child or teen to really notice all of the pleasant feelings and physical sensations they experience in this safe place. Encourage the child to allow the safe place to nourish and comfort them whenever they need it.

d) Soothing the Senses

During times of stress, it's helpful to engage in enjoyable activities that help to soothe the senses, calm fears, nurture the body, and bring children and teens into the present moment. Here are a few ideas to consider; feel free to be creative with your own.

Activity of fruits (experience the fruit with all its senses: smell it, touch it, look at it and taste it).

With Smell:

Suggest they use a favorite scented lotion or take a fragrant bubble bath if they have a bathtub at home; have scented flowers in your office; if their living conditions allow it, encourage them to bake cookies, bread or a cake; smell the sea.

With Hearing:

Have them listen to something really funny; play relaxing or exciting music; read a book out loud or tell a favorite story to a younger child. Introduce children of all ages to poetry; encourage younger kids to create rhyming verses, listen to the sound of running water, birds, the sound of the person you love, or the sound of the waves.

With Touch:

Teach children how to use touch to calm themselves; one way is by rubbing a piece of fabric that feels comfortable. Have some smooth, colorful, or sparkling rocks that they can touch, sand, mud, water, blanket, cats, or parent face.

With Vision:

Have them look at a photo or piece of art and describe what they see; encourage them to observe plants and animals in nature or watch a great movie. If they have access to a camera, encourage children and teens to take pictures of what they find interesting, green spaces, trees, the sea, etc.

With Taste:

Serve their favorite drink; treat them to a dessert or their favorite food; encourage a child or teenager to slow down and really taste the food they eat.



e) A Soothing Kit

Make or have children create their own small kit or pouch that contains interesting and inspiring things for them to look at, smell, or touch. They can carry it around with them and look through it when they need to.

4. FEAR AND STRESS

Although it's common for children and teens to have certain fears and stress about conflict situations or the insecurity of another war happening, it's important to address the fear before it gets too strong. It may be helpful to review the early signs of anxiety with the child or adolescent. These might include a tightening in the chest, sweating, or a racing heartbeat.

Working with the child, develop a list of early warning signs.

*“What does your body feel like when you begin to feel very worried?”
“Tell me what you were thinking just before you started to get worried.”
“Do you notice what you are worried or scared about? What scares you the most?” “What can we do to help you with these worries?”*

Do some detective work together to try to identify the potential cause of the fear and the stress. Then come up with options for relaxing the body and calming the thoughts before the anxiety becomes difficult to manage. If a younger child is upset, consider distractions such as

singing a familiar song, counting backwards, or reciting the alphabet. When you begin to notice the child or teen calming down, praise them for their efforts:

“Did you notice how you helped yourself with your fears?”

“You are finding ways to help yourself.”

“You must feel proud...”

It is helpful to instill the idea that the child can learn ways to master or control their fears more effectively.



a) **Panic Attacks**

Although not as common, some children and adolescents who experience strong fears may also develop panic attacks. Panic attacks involve a sudden rush of fear that coincides with physical symptoms and behaviors. A panic attack typically peaks for a few minutes and then subsides. They often develop without much warning, and can include the following symptoms:

- Unexpected and repeated intense fear or discomfort
- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Shortness of breath
- Trembling or shaking
- Nausea or stomachaches
- Fear of dying, losing control, or going crazy
- Sense of unreality or feeling detached, numb

It is helpful to remind caregivers that these attacks do not mean that the child or teenager is weak, going crazy, or losing all control. They are, however, a serious sign that he/she needs assistance in coping with fear so intense that it may not otherwise go away on its own.

To cope with a panic attack, help the child to accept and face the symptoms rather than fight through them.

“OK, here it is. You can allow your body to go through this. Watch and see how you do this. You can ride this through. Take the time you need to relax. It will be over soon.”

Initially you will need to say these types of statements directly to the child or teen. With more practice and experience, the child or teen will learn the skill of engaging in helpful self-talk.

Whenever possible, be present for the children during and after a panic attack. They will need tangible forms of support and encouragement to decrease the intensity of their fears.

A child experiencing panic attacks requires on-going help. Refer the child to a medical or mental health professional for an evaluation.

b) Handling Traumatic Memories

Dreams and Nightmares:

If children are experiencing memories through dreams and nightmares, encourage them to talk about, write, or draw the dream the next day. Sometimes it can be helpful to assist the child in transforming difficult parts of the dream in ways that help him/her feel stronger, safer, or more in control. For example, a child who dreams of being trapped in a war and left behind can draw a picture of the whole family working together to quickly rescue him to safety.

“Now that you are awake, you have the power to change the dream to make it a little better.”

Recognizing Triggers:

After they have experienced a traumatic event,



children and teens can find themselves constantly on guard for danger. Part of this vigilance includes being extremely sensitive to reminders or “triggers” in their environment; these are interpreted as signs that a similar event might happen again. Reminders can be obvious such as hearing the gun shots in the trees or seeing a particular picture in T.V, or it can be subtle, such as seeing a curtain being blown by an electric fan or air conditioner. The associations or triggers, whether subtle or obvious, can set significant fear in motion; they can create a cascade of upsetting thoughts, physiological reactions, and memories.

To help children with this problem, have them name all of the triggers they can think of that might lead to a difficult memory. Write them down on a list. Simply being more aware of potential triggers and discussing them with the child can create a greater sense of personal control over the traumatic event, thereby reducing fearfulness and uncertainty. *“Now, what can we do to best care for these thoughts and feelings that remind you of the war?”*

Being in the Present Moment:

If children or teens appear stuck in a memory from the past, you can help them bring their awareness solidly back to the present by helping them notice things in their surroundings.

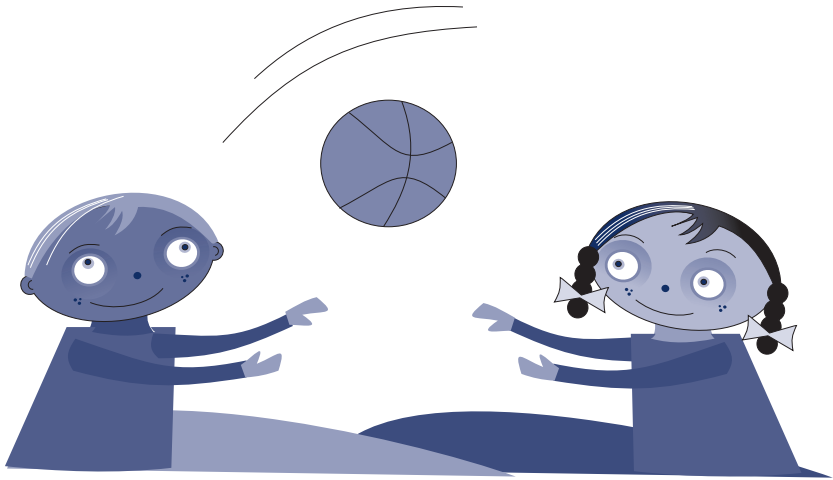
Encourage the child to take slow, deep breaths and to sit down comfortably. Have children look around the room and report on what they see, what they hear, and what they smell. Encourage children to rely on their own senses, and report things that they perceive. You might take the lead, by saying something like:

*“I see a blue cup on the table,” or
“I hear someone talking in the distance.”*

Suggest that they touch something nearby—for instance, a piece of jewelry, a favorite stuffed animal, the padded arm of a chair, or a pet. You might say:

*“It will be OK. This will pass.” “I am right here with you. I will help to keep you safe.”
“Remember to take deep breaths. This can help slow down the thoughts.”
“Your mind and body are very strong. You can do this.”
“I am right here with you. I will help keep you safe now.”*

For anxious children, try 'soothing' activities: reading a book, or listening



to music, or any of the other suggestions under 'Soothing the Senses'.

For children and teens experiencing significant difficulty coping with past memories, please refer them to a psychologist or psychiatrist for further assistance.

Exercise, Sleep and Healthy Eating:

Exercise is one of the most effective strategies for reducing anxiety in children and teens. It literally uses up the nervous energy associated with stress.

Exercise strengthens the body and builds resistance to stress-related reactions and physical illnesses. Regular walking, sports activities and physical play are all healthy options. Yoga may be a good option for children who don't participate in team sports.

Getting adequate sleep and eating healthy foods also helps to rejuvenate the body and protect against the adverse physical and emotional effects of anxiety and trauma.

To the extent possible, encourage children and teens to refrain from diets high in white sugar, white flour, unhealthy fats, and processed foods. These diets have been linked to an increase in anxiety and other physical health problems. The body benefits most from a natural, well-balanced, and gentle diet particularly during times of peak stress.

Encourage children and teens to try to keep a regular schedule for eating, going to bed/waking up, and bathing.

Encourage them to eat well, but allow children and teens to make choices about meals. The act of personal choice is empowering.

c) Warning Signs

Some of the children or teens you may be working with may be experiencing prolonged and more severe reactions that will require on-going structured care and/or medication. The following list highlights symptomology that indicates the need for on-going clinical care:

- Threatens to harm self or others.
- Recurrent thoughts of dying or suicide.
- Inability to function normally with family and friends because of intense grief, anxiety, or fears.
- Debilitating anxiety and avoidance of things and situations they used to enjoy.
- Re-experiencing the trauma through recurrent nightmares or flashbacks.
- Extreme feelings of guilt, depression, sadness.
- Dramatic changes in mood, sleeping and eating habits, and activity levels.

If you are not trained to provide care for these types of symptoms, please refer the child for an evaluation by a medical or mental health professional. Remember, there are medicines available to also help children.

Thank you for the care and support you are providing to the war-affected youth in your community. Your role is instrumental to their well-being and long-term emotional recovery.



2nd floor, Abu Ghaluion Building 2
Ahmed Orabi St., Gaza City
Tel: +972 (8) 2823071
Fax: +972 (8) 2826331
www.mercycorps.org

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Humanitarian Aid

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