

## When a Child's Parent has PTSD

This fact sheet explains common problems for children of Emergency Service Workers and other caregivers with PTSD. It also gives tips for how to cope with these problems.

### How might a parent's PTSD symptoms affect his or her children?

PTSD includes a range of symptoms that can have an effect on family members. The following are some examples of how certain kinds of PTSD symptoms can affect children.

#### Re-experiencing symptoms

People who have PTSD often "re-experience" traumatic events through memories or dreams. This can happen quickly and can seem to come out of nowhere. These symptoms often come with strong feelings of grief, guilt, fear, or anger. Sometimes the experience can be so strong that you may think the trauma is happening again. These symptoms can be scary not only for you but also for your children. Children may not understand what is happening or why it is happening. They may worry about their parent or worry that the parent cannot take care of them.

#### Avoidance and numbing symptoms

Because the re-experiencing symptoms are so upsetting, people with PTSD try not to think about the event. If you have PTSD, you may also try to avoid places and things that remind you of the trauma. Or you may not feel like doing things that used to be fun, like going to the movies or your child's event. It can also be hard for people with PTSD to have good feelings. You may feel "cut off" from family and children. As a result, children may feel that the parent with PTSD does not care about them.

#### Hyperarousal symptoms

People with PTSD tend to be anxious and "on edge." With PTSD, you might have trouble sleeping or paying attention. You might be grouchy or angry much of the time. You may be easily scared, or overly worried about your safety or the safety of your loved ones. It is easy to see how these problems can affect family members. For example, acting grouchy can make a parent seem mean or angry. Since they do not understand the symptoms of PTSD, children may wonder whether the parent loves them.

### How do children respond?

A parent's PTSD symptoms are directly linked to their child's responses. Children usually respond in certain ways:

- A child might feel and behave just like their parent as a way of trying to connect with the parent. The child might show some of the same symptoms as the parent with PTSD.
- A child may take on the adult role to fill in for the parent with PTSD. The child acts too grown-up for his or her age.
- Some children do not get help with their feelings. This can lead to problems at school, sadness, anxiety (worry, fear), and relationship problems later in life.

### Can children get PTSD from their parents?

Although not common, it is possible for children to show signs of PTSD because they are upset by their parent's symptoms. Trauma symptoms can also be passed from parent to child or between generations. This is called "intergenerational transmission of trauma." Here is how it happens:

- When a family silences a child, or teaches him to not talk about disturbing events, thoughts, or feelings, the child's anxiety gets worse. He may start to worry about causing the parent's symptoms if he talks about the trauma. He may create his own ideas about what happened to the parent, which can be worse than what actually happened.
- Sometimes parents share too many full details about the events. Children then can start to experience their own set of PTSD symptoms in response to these terrible images.
- A child may begin to share in her parent's symptoms as a way to connect with the parent.
- Children may also repeat or re-do some aspect of the trauma because they see that their parent has difficulty separating the past trauma from the present moment.

### How can I help?

Parents or professionals can talk to family members about the possible impact of a parent's PTSD on children. It can help for family members to learn how traumatic reactions can be passed from parent to child.

A good first step in helping children cope with a parent's PTSD is to explain the reasons for the parent's difficulties. Be careful not to share too many details of the event(s) with the child. How much you say depends on your child's age and maturity level. It is important to help children see that your symptoms are not their fault. Some parents want help with what to say to their children, and a counselor could help with this.

### Treatment options

There are also many treatment options. Treatment can include individual treatment for the adult with PTSD as well as family therapy. Family therapy supports the parent with PTSD and teaches family members how to get their own needs met.

Children may benefit from their own therapy as well, which might differ based on the child's age. Each family is different, and decisions about what kind of treatment to seek, if any, can be hard. The most important thing is to help each member of the family, including the children.