

Understanding PTSD for Young People in Out-of-Home Care

A Feeling Better Initiative

Many young people in out-of-home care experience anxiety disorders such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, specific phobias, social phobia, generalised anxiety disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Of all anxiety disorders, anecdotally within Australia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) appears to be the most commonly reported for those connected to out-of-home care/child protection.

What is PTSD?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a form of anxiety, is a set of reactions that can develop in people who have experienced or witnessed an event that threatens their life or safety (or that of others around them), which increases feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror and being unsafe. This distress is a natural response to traumatic events, and most people 'recover' from it after a short period of time. However, sometimes the distress can last for a very long time and develop into PTSD. Although everyone's experience of PTSD will be different, there's a few key things to look out for:

Feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event. Feeling flat or numb.

Thoughts include re-experiencing or reliving the traumatic event by for example unwanted and recurring memories ('flashbacks') and / or nightmares. The ability to focus and concentrate can also be reduced. Difficulty imagining a future.

Behaviours like avoidance of anything that reminds the person of the event, including activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings. This includes becoming emotionally numb or losing interest in normal activities. Constantly being on the lookout for any signs of danger can be common – 'hypervigilant'.

Physical symptoms like shakiness, sweating, racing heart, muscle tension, sleeping problems, jumpy/easily startled.

Here's how one young person in out-of-home care described PTSD:

'It gets me when I'm alone, it gets me when I stop being active, it reminds me of its presence when I sleep, I can't stop the memories because they are embedded into everything I am, and everything I stand for and stand against, my memories are me, my memories are bad because the bad things that happened are all I can remember'.

Why are young people in out - of home care at risk of experiencing PTSD?

PTSD and associated trauma-related disorders can be found in all young people irrespective of the type of trauma experienced.

Young people in out-of-home care however have a higher risk of experiencing PTSD given the number and type of scary/traumatic experiences that they may



have been and/or currently exposed to. What complicates this further is that young people in out-of-home often know the person that harmed/or is currently harming them. This can make it harder for young people to trust others, which can make it more complex to 'work through' the trauma.

Young people who are in out-of-home care can sometimes go through other tough situations that their friends who aren't in care don't go through. For example, they might move placements and schools a lot, not have contact with their birth parents and siblings, have experienced abuse which continues to upset and affect them, feel shame about being in care and feel different from other people their age.

On top of all of this, adolescence is a time when young people are trying to develop a sense of identity and understand who they are. This period of time however can become complicated and harder for those in out-of-home care given their experiences of trauma, multiple losses, constant 'changes' in their lives and difficulties with trusting others.

'Every young person has developed PTSD due to circumstances that can never be explained only experienced'.

Where to go for help

It's important to seek support early if experiencing PTSD. Without support, symptoms can start to take over your life. Thankfully, there are lots of places and people who can help and support you if you are experiencing PTSD.

A lot of young people in care say that reaching out and speaking to someone they trust, like a carer, teacher or sports coach, really helps!

Is there someone in your life you trust and feel like you can talk to? If so, we really recommend talking to this person about what you're going through.

Otherwise, there are great workers you can reach out to:

KidsHelpLine

- 1800 55 1800
- <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>
- A 24-hour free and private phone and online counselling service for people aged 5 to 25.

Headspace

- <https://headspace.org.au/>
- headspace provides information and advice to young people about issues like general health, mental health and alcohol and drugs.

oneplace

- <https://www.oneplace.org.au/>
- oneplace is a free easily accessible online Community Services Directory for Queensland.

Mental Health care plan

Your GP may be able to help you access a mental health plan which will entitle you to up to 10 appointments with a support person like a psychologist or social worker.

Mental Health

Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) specialises in helping children and young people who have complex mental health needs. Talk to your GP or guidance officer and they can help refer you to CYMHS, or to other suitable services.

Here's what one young person had to say about her experience ...

'I'm linked in with a mental health service. I love my worker. She has helped to find and link me in with more supports.'

Of course, if you are in a life-threatening situation, you should always phone 000.

Here's some more advice from young people in care ...

'Talking about it helps but mental health isn't a broken arm. Sometimes time doesn't heal the pain, it makes the pain easier to deal with. We all live with the memories of our traumatic pasts, we all suffer from those memories, we all work to make life as good as it can be, with the cards we were dealt. Nevertheless PTSD is a big issue!'