

Identifying Signs of Post-Traumatic Stress

There are many triggers and reminders from the environment that can lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms presenting in students. Inside students' bodies and minds they can experience **sensations, intrusive thoughts and images, and flashbacks** that also increase these symptoms.

Understanding the signs of someone struggling with post-traumatic stress symptoms can allow school staff to better recognize what might be going on for students, and what might be the most appropriate approach to support that student.

The following table summarizes post-traumatic stress symptoms by developmental level. Review the symptoms for the grade levels you work with and then complete the exercise below.



Preschool Children

- Separation anxiety or clinginess toward preferred staff or caregivers
- Lack of progress in development relative to peers or regressing
- Difficulty sleeping and changes in appetite
- Over or under reacting to the environment, like physical touch or loud noises
- Difficulty managing mood, irritability, intense sadness, or anger
- Increased fear or anxiety, particularly relating to the safety of themselves and others
- Preoccupation with death or dying
- Physical complaints like aches, pains, stomachaches
- Traumatic themes in their play, art, or writing

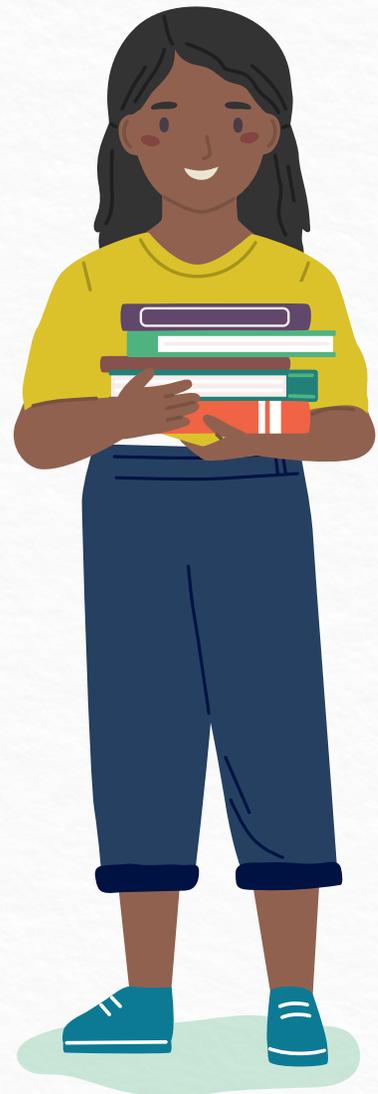


Elementary School Students

- Worry the traumatic event will happen again or about the safety of themselves or others
- Withdrawing from others and struggling with trust
- Being over or under active relative to the past and peers
- Difficulties concentrating
- Disruptions in sleep and appetite
- Being overly emotionally reactive (anger or overwhelm) or seeming emotionally numb
- Avoiding certain people or places
- Traumatic themes in their play, art, writing or what they talk about
- Absenteeism
- Physical complaints like aches, pains, stomachaches
- Difficulty appropriately interpreting social cues and the intentions of others
- Preoccupation with death, dying, or serious injury

Middle School Students

- Worry the traumatic event or similar events will happen again
- Concern and worry for the safety of themselves and others
- Physical complaints like aches, pains, stomachaches
- Repeatedly discussing the traumatic event and similar events
- Over and underreacting to the environment, like loud noises and physical touch
- Withdrawing from others and struggling with trust
- Disruptions in sleep and appetite
- Avoiding certain people or places
- Difficulty managing feelings and discomfort with certain thoughts and feelings
- Flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and nightmares
- Being overly emotional and overwhelmed or seeming emotionally numb
- Decreased attention and focus, tendency to zone out or daydreaming
- Thoughts, discussion, and researching death, dying, and serious injury



High School Students

- Worry the traumatic event or similar events will happen again
- Concern for the safety of themselves and others
- Withdrawing from others and struggling with trust
- Discussing traumatic experiences and related events
- Substance use
- Outburst of anger or aggression
- Emotional numbing
- Difficulty with focus and attention, tendency to zone out or daydream
- Sensitivity to authority, redirection, and criticism
- Intense reactions to loss of relationships, even if they were unhealthy or short in duration
- Preoccupation with death, dying, serious injury
- Avoiding certain people or places
- Feeling out of control and not being able to understand their emotions
- Impulsivity and risk taking behaviors



Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Practice

For the grade levels with which you work, identify how and when you might see five of these symptoms present and what you might do to support these students.



Example:

At the elementary level, we might see students regularly separate themselves from others during unstructured periods and difficulties building friendships. When playing games or attempting to join in activities, they might feel that others are excluding them on purpose or making them lose intentionally. To support these students, we will practice greetings and ways of asking to join games. We will emphasize skills like turn taking and perspective during class activities. If their difficulties trusting others persist, we will refer to support staff so they can learn skills, like how to interpret the behaviors of others.

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