

CASE EXAMPLES OF TRAUMA REACTIONS IN YOUNG PEOPLE

Information sheet produced for the Victorian Bushfire Support and
Training for Affected Schools Project

May 2010

D1.1

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

Illustrative case examples of trauma reactions

It is important to understand the variety of ways in which young people react to traumatic events. Here we provide some illustrative case examples to demonstrate the different ways in which children might react over time. Of course these reactions will depend on many factors such as pre-trauma functioning, home and social support and other problems. The examples give you some idea of the sorts of behaviours and issues you might see in young people.

The children described below have all been affected by some type of traumatic event. Most of them were affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires.

Remember, every child responds differently to traumatic events, and they might show some or even many of these characteristics. Some might show distress straight away, and symptoms might develop over time for other children.

Meet Sam: four years old

Sam is a four-year-old boy whose family was affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires. Since then, you've noticed his behaviour has been progressively getting worse in the classroom. At first, he seemed to be restless, have difficulty staying in his seat and listening to instructions. But more recently, he has started showing some aggressive behaviours towards other children. He grabs toys from other kids, pushes or hits them and throws himself on the ground when he doesn't get his own way. You've also noticed that he just seems more jumpy than he used to be, and harder to settle. His behaviour is starting to impact the classroom.

At first, people might think Sam is just being disobedient and naughty.

Meet Jane: seven years old

Jane is seven years old and, although she has always seemed a little anxious, she has seemed more clingy than usual since the bushfires. When her mother drops her off in the morning, she is very teary and it can take mum quite some time to calm her down. Even after mum leaves, Jane likes to sit in the front row and tries to stay as close as possible to the teacher. She has also started wetting her pants (which she hasn't done before), which the other children have noticed. Her mother has also mentioned to you that she seems more fearful than before and is also having nightmares and trouble sleeping. Jane frequently arrives without her homework completed and sometimes leaves her homework book at home. Jane's mother also seems quite anxious and is very worried about her daughter. Jane's mother tells you that they have spent the past year rebuilding their home and are getting ready to move in soon. Jane's mum has very mixed feelings about moving into their new home.

Jane has always been a bit anxious, but things have certainly gotten worse over the past year.

AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

Meet Jack: 10 years old

10-year-old Jack has always been an outgoing child, with lots of friends. Over the past year he hasn't spent as much time with friends as he normally does. He tends to go to the library at lunch time and has stopped playing sport. Although he is still going okay with his schoolwork, he doesn't seem to put his hand up to answer as many questions and doesn't seem to get involved with other kids in the classroom. His mood also just seems to be a bit flat and he just doesn't seem to laugh as much anymore.

Although Jack is still going okay at school, there has been a change in his behaviour since the fires.

Meet Sarah: 13 years old

Sarah is 13 and lost her house in the Black Saturday Bushfires. Even though it's been a while since the fires, she still gets quite upset when she is reminded of anything to do with the bushfires. If anyone in the class starts talking about the fires, she starts crying, becomes agitated or leaves the room. Sometimes during class, she looks as though she is just staring off into space and will only respond when her name has been called several times. Last week, she became visibly upset when she heard a siren outside the classroom and she went white and started shaking. Sarah also just doesn't seem to be able to relax and always seems on edge.

Sarah seems to be having a lot of difficulty talking about the fires and always seems on edge.

Meet James: 16 years old

James is 16 years old. His teachers last year reported that he was a good student who got along with everyone. This year however, he has been talking back a lot to teachers, fighting with his classmates and has generally become quite irritable. He is very distracted in the classroom, isn't completing his homework and his grades are slipping. He has just been suspended for turning up to the school dance intoxicated and for smoking at lunch time. When anyone tries to talk to James about how he is feeling, he shuts down and tells them he is fine and that he doesn't want to talk about it.

Although James is showing some common teenage behaviours, it is very different to his usual behaviour and he doesn't want to talk about it.

As you can see, there are many different ways young people may show reactions to traumatic events. Sometimes these reactions will be very obvious to those around them and other times children and adolescents might show more subtle changes in behaviour.