

# Normal Responses to Traumatic Events

**Dr. Stephen Coulter**

**UMN Mental Health Adviser**

[This presentation has been created for the general good and can be freely shared  
and used by any individual or group that feels comfortable doing so]



*Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society*



# Overview

- What is Psychological Trauma?
- Range of Normal Responses
- How it affects Children & Families
- How to Help Recovery
- Time for Questions



# What is Psychological Trauma?

- 'Trauma' – means a wound
- Psychological trauma is a wound to the 'Psyche' or mind
- Just as physical wounds heal over time by natural means so too wounded minds heal through natural processes
- Traumatic events can wound our minds due to the overload of sensory information about something outside our usual experience that hits us in a short space of time.



# Important to Remember that:

- Full recovery (in weeks or a few months) is the normal outcome for people who have experienced a traumatic event
- In the beginning most trauma symptoms protect us from being overwhelmed. They only become a problem if they don't go away
- Children can learn coping skills that will help them in the future when they meet other difficult situations
- Reactions can be delayed. Particularly at risk are those who have immediately had to take on significant responsibility for family, friends, and within organisations



*Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society*



# Normal Responses 1

## 1. Intrusive Symptoms

Recurrent involuntary memories

Traumatic nightmares

Flashbacks

Emotional distress after exposure to things that remind you of the traumatic event

Odd bodily sensations & pains



*Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society*



# Normal Responses 2

## 2. Avoidance of Things that Remind you of the Traumatic Event

Trying to block out Trauma-related thoughts or feelings (sometimes by use of drugs/alcohol)

Avoiding reminders e.g. people, places, activities, or situations associated with the traumatic event



# Normal Responses 3

## 3. Changes in Thinking and Mood

Cannot remember some parts of the traumatic event

Negative beliefs e.g., 'I am bad', 'I am to blame', 'The world is completely dangerous'

Feelings of fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame

Reduced interest in (pre-traumatic) significant activities e.g. work, hobbies, sports, schoolwork

Feeling cut off from other people

Feeling emotionally numb (not experiencing negative or positive emotions)



# Normal Responses 4

## 4. High Arousal of the Nervous System

Irritable or aggressive behaviour

Self-destructive or reckless behaviour

Hyper-vigilance

Exaggerated startle response

Difficult to concentrate

Sleep disturbance





## But... Please note...

*'Not all psychological injury can be encompassed by a list of symptoms or disorders. Trauma can alter the very meaning we give to our lives, and can produce feelings and experiences that are not easily categorized in diagnostic manuals.'*

Briere and Scott (2006, p. 17)



Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society



# Peoples' Biggest Issues After Trauma can be:

- Anger
- Guilt
- Blame
- Shame
- Questions about the meaning of life
- Depression
- Relationship Difficulties



# Impact on Children

World has become a frightening place – loss of  
'sense of safety'

They want to stay close to parents/relatives

Poor concentration - underachieving at school

Return to behaviour expected of a younger child

Become more naughty or disobedient

Repetitive and/or destructive play



*Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society*



# Impact on Parents

Less available to meet child's physical and emotional needs (because they are pre-occupied with their own issues)

Don't want their children to go out as normal (i.e. away from them)

Can become too lenient in their management of their children's' behaviours



# Impact on Families

- Family members can feel isolated
- Difficulty in talking about the traumatic event
- May have missing a member(s)
- More arguing due to increase in irritability
- Confusion - when different people respond in different ways and recover at different speeds



# How to Help Recovery 1

- Love the ones you are with
- Encourage talking (without forcing it)
- Don't make unrealistic promises to your children
- Make your home a safe as possible
- Try and re-establish normal routines (as far as practicable)
- Try and maintain good self-care



## How to Help Recovery 2

- Make some allowance for your children's behavior – but still maintain good behavioral boundaries
- Don't worry about having trauma symptoms (even though they can be distressing) - just manage/experience them – give it time
- **If** symptoms don't go away in 6-8 weeks consider seeking professional help



# Time for Questions



*Fullness of life for all, in a transformed Nepali society*

