

## PTSD IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Both children and adults can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after a traumatic event. At first, it is natural to feel a multitude of emotions such as sadness, anger and guilt, which are often mixed together. Others, on the contrary, feel cut off from their emotions.

All these reactions are common and frequent, and gradually diminish over time, eventually disappearing, usually within a month. However, sometimes difficulties take hold.

The warning signs are the same as for an adult. The child may involuntarily relive the traumatic event in the form of nightmares, flashes or thoughts. They may also avoid anything that reminds them of the traumatic event. They may also feel constantly on the alert.

However, the child may also have difficulty remembering important aspects of the event. They may refuse to go to school or sleep alone. They may wet the bed. They may also lose interest in things that used to interest them, lose their appetite and have problems with attention and concentration. Against the child's volition, facing up to the traumatic event

mobilises a lot of their resources and attention. The effort required could interfere with the capacity to learn and develop. They may also be in more frequent conflict with those closest to them. The child is constantly preparing to face any danger and feel safe again. All this effort can make them less patient or more sensitive to those around them. The child may also feel guilty about what happened.

If these signs last for more than a month and the child is unable to resume their normal life at home or at school, it is time to consult a healthcare professional for help and support for the child and their family. It is important to identify and treat the disorder as soon as possible because, beyond the immediate symptoms of suffering, PTSD compromises the child's development. It impairs their capacity to regulate their emotions, form attachments, learn, socialise and form bonds, etc.

The effects of PTSD on a child's development are very long-lasting. Although it is never too late to treat PTSD, the sooner the better, especially for children and adolescents.

### ➤ Warning signs in children aged 0-6 years

- ➔ Intrusive thoughts that occur when the child is calm.
- ➔ Invasive negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc.)
- ➔ Stress reactions when something or someone reminds them of the event (panic, shock, agitation, etc.)
- ➔ Sleep disorders (nightmares, sleepwalking, night terrors, restless sleep).
- ➔ Cheerless games or drawings which may or may not be linked to the traumatic event and which are often repetitive.
- ➔ Manifestations of fear or anxiety often unrelated to the event (darkness, monsters).
- ➔ Regression and a return to previous stages of development (separation anxiety, carrying around cuddly toys, bedwetting, etc.).
- ➔ Tantrums, crying.

### ➤ Warning signs in children aged 6-12 years

- ➔ Intrusive thoughts that occur when the child is calm.
- ➔ Invasive negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc.)
- ➔ Intrusive memories are limited to a single image, sound or smell.
- ➔ The memory of the event may be blurred. The child may forget details or even how the event occurred.
- ➔ Sleep disorders (nightmares, sleepwalking, night terrors, restless sleep, difficulty falling asleep).
- ➔ Stress reactions when something or someone reminds them of the event (panic, shock, agitation, etc.).
- ➔ Cheerless anxious types of games or drawings which may or may not be linked to the traumatic event and which are often repetitive with elements symbolic of danger.
- ➔ Fears linked to the traumatic event.
- ➔ Hypervigilance. The child is therefore easily startled.
- ➔ Separation anxiety.
- ➔ Disinterest in what used to be of interest.
- ➔ Difficulty concentrating and paying attention at school.
- ➔ Somatisation: headache, stomach ache, eczema, etc.

### ➤ Warning signs in adolescents

- ➔ Intrusive thoughts.
- ➔ Sleep disorders.
- ➔ Hypervigilance.
- ➔ Avoiding anything that might be a reminder of the event (people, places, etc.).
- ➔ Invasive negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc.).
- ➔ Stress reactions when something or someone reminds them of the event (panic, shock, agitation, etc.)
- ➔ Withdrawal.
- ➔ Unstable attitudes and moods.
- ➔ Difficulty concentrating and paying attention, notably at school.
- ➔ Somatisation: headache, stomach ache, eczema, etc.
- ➔ Behavioural problems (eating disorders, scarification, running away, impulsiveness, getting drunk, drug-taking).
- ➔ Addictions.