

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' TRAUMA REACTIONS



Foundation
House

The Victorian Foundation
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

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Anticipating and sensitively responding to students' trauma reactions supports their recovery from traumatic refugee experiences.

WHAT ARE TRAUMA REACTIONS?

Children and young people of refugee backgrounds are likely to experience trauma reactions when they are overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and fear that were associated with prior experiences of danger.

Trauma reactions occur when the body's alarm system is 'triggered'. Common triggers at school may include:

- » Unexplained changes in routine
- » Adult strangers entering the classroom
- » Authoritarian and threatening behaviour
- » Confined spaces
- » Sudden loud noises
- » People in uniforms

To cope with anxiety and fear, students may seek to avoid whatever triggers it. They may attempt to shut down by numbing their feelings and restricting the amount of information they take in.

WHAT WOULD A TEACHER SEE OR HEAR?

In a school setting, feelings of intense anxiety and fear related to children's prior experiences of danger may present in a variety of ways, including:

- » Reactive, defensive, angry patterns of interacting at school (with themselves and others)
- » Inability to tolerate frustration
- » Withdrawal and disengagement in the classroom, not progressing, and unable to pay attention in class
- » An apparent inability to form relationships with other children (teachers may comment about the student not having empathy or ability to play)
- » Child unable to be calmed, to self-regulate or co-regulate with a known teacher or their parent/carer
- » Sensitivity to perceived injustice



HOW TO RESPOND WHEN YOU THINK A STUDENT IS EXPERIENCING TRAUMA REACTIONS

Restoring safety and enhancing control is crucial to addressing trauma reactions. You can remind students they are in a safe place now, and use strategies to nurture feelings of control.

If there seems to be a pattern/frequency of reactions, the following steps can be followed in most situations:

- » In a safe setting, share with the student what you have noticed about their behaviour
- » Ask them if they know why it is happening (they may have no idea)
- » Indicate that it is okay if they do not know or not want to talk about it
- » Listen and show acknowledgement if experiences are disclosed
- » If a problem is disclosed, determine whether it can be addressed within the school setting
- » Share your observations and concerns with school wellbeing staff. If appropriate, take a team approach to supporting the student involving class teachers, wellbeing staff, school leadership and the student's family
- » Offer the student follow-up support. For example referral to school wellbeing or Foundation House

EMERGENCY SITUATION : If you think a student may be at risk of harming themselves or others, immediate action is needed. Follow your school's emergency protocol.

WHEN DO STUDENTS REQUIRE A REFERRAL?

Not all students of refugee backgrounds exhibiting trauma reactions require a referral to Foundation House.

Where problems are persistent and severely disrupt the student's capacity to participate and learn, a referral to Foundation House may be necessary.

Always follow your school's processes around referral, e.g. speaking with your school's wellbeing coordinator or school leadership before making a referral.

See [Making a referral to Foundation House.](#)



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