

# EARTHQUAKE STRESS SYMPTOMS IN CHILDREN

## – Information Sheet for Parents

Many children will experience symptoms of psychological distress after the recent earthquake and aftershocks. This is part of a normal and healthy stress response to such a traumatic event and is not harmful.

### Symptoms your child might experience

Normal responses include

- Re-experiencing (flashbacks), bad dreams and frightening thoughts.
- Wanting to avoid any reminders (e.g. the room where the earthquake was experienced).
- Feelings such as feeling numb, losing interest in activities, and feeling worried and guilty.
- Being easily startled, feeling on edge, sleeping problems, irritability.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches or upset, sore muscles and poor appetite.
- In very young children symptoms can include bedwetting when they've already learnt how to use the toilet; less developed speech than usual; acting out the scary event during playtime; and being unusually clingy with you or other adults.
- Older children and teens usually show symptoms similar to those seen in adults. They may also display disruptive, disrespectful, or destructive behaviours.

These symptoms are normal at this extraordinary time – they are your child's body preparing to respond to danger.

### Is this Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

No – these are normal healthy responses by your child's mind and body to stress.

### What should I do?

- There is no 'right thing' to do – every child is different. What is important is for your child to work through the experience of the earthquake at their own pace.
- It is best not to push them to discuss what happened if they do not want to but if they want to then let them do this.
- Listen to your child's fears and explanations about what happened.

- It is important to keep to normal daily routines and rules.
- Regular routines are important such as mealtimes and bedtimes. Encourage them to eat at the usual times even if they do not feel hungry.
- Your child may wish to have a torch in their bedroom at night.
- Return to some sense of normality, such as playing with friends, going back to school.
- Encourage interaction with friends and family.
- If children are demonstrating aggression or anger then use a nurturing but firm approach, pointing out their behaviour is not acceptable.
- Reinforce the positive aspects of their behaviour during and since the earthquake.
- Be supportive and reassuring, children may need to be held.
- Be as calm as you can – your children will pick up on your anxiety.
- Your child's fears are genuine to them, this may include worries they may be separated from their parents and needing them close. Talk this through with them.
- Explain what you know about the disaster. You may need to do this more than once. Children may want to re-enact or draw pictures about the earthquake, this is ok.
- Be aware of what your child is being exposed to from television, newspaper and other media coverage of events – this may increase their anxiety.

### **Will these symptoms go away?**

- Yes these feelings will generally ease over time and most children will not have ongoing symptoms.
- If your child has more severe symptoms that are not easing using the measures listed above, talk to your doctor and practice nurse. There is specialised and effective help available for those who are suffering from more severe or longer term symptoms.

### **Will medication help?**

Generally medication is not helpful and may do more harm than good in this initial period.