



## Ohel Children's Home and Family Services

### **PROCESSING THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA CONFLICT/WAR** *Help for adults and the children in their lives*

3/1/22

*It goes without saying that we are all concerned with the tumultuous events surrounding the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. There are many in the community who have strong historical and current connections to Ukraine, Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union. The anguish and anxiety of having to watch this situation unfold from afar, while fearing for family and friends, can be deeply painful.*

*Ohel Zachter Family National Trauma Center is committed to providing support to you, your family and the general community as we collectively process these events. We offer the following recommendations based on an awareness that everyone is unique both in their style of coping and proximity to these events.*

*If you need further assistance, please don't hesitate to reach out at 1-800-603-OHEL(6435) or [access@ohelfamily.org](mailto:access@ohelfamily.org)*

#### **General Points**

- While as caring individuals, we are all affected by world events, it is obviously more profoundly felt by those personally connected to Ukraine and Russia.
- **All feelings are legitimate. There is no right or wrong way to react. Some people will feel increased agitation, and other people may withdraw emotionally. Common reactions are fear, sadness, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and difficulty focusing.**
- Recognize and accept your feelings as normal responses to extreme, upsetting and abnormal circumstances.
- Since everybody reacts differently, people close to you may not react as you do. It's important to respect everybody's coping style. When looking for support, look for someone who you believe is able to provide the compassionate response that you need.
- Most people manage these feelings without outside professional assistance. Putting feelings into words is very therapeutic.
- Maintain a regular schedule as much as possible, but give yourself permission to take time out as needed.

- Remember to HALT- getting Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired can put an individual at more risk for feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage a stressful situation.
- Try not to perceive any difficulty with coping as evidence of weakness. This is not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of your humanity.

### Helping Children

- **Children’s coping will especially be correlated to the coping of the adults around them. Therefore, it is important for parents and teachers to pay attention to their own reactions. Children are reading your voice, tone and body language even more than your words.**
- Before processing with your children, try to understand your own thoughts and feeling about the conflict. This does not mean that you are not worried or scared, but that you’re able to access and express these emotions in a contained manner – and that you have a narrative about these events to give over to your children. Some ideas may be “people are fighting over who is in charge,” to a more nuanced explanation about the pursuit of power and the cost of freedom for older children.
- It is acceptable to share your emotions and even cry in front of your children. It is not indicative of weakness or fragility, and as long as the crying is not uncontrolled, it need not be scary to children. It models expression of feelings that are expected given the situation.
- Parents should check in with their child about what they heard and understand about the events in Ukraine. Parents should clarify misinformation and tell children the truth about what is happening, using age appropriate and concrete language.
- **Parents should assess the need to give more information and don’t answer more than what was asked by the child. Take cues from your child, some may need more explanation and others less. Parents can also answer questions by saying “I don’t know.”**
- **As the world outside may appear unsafe and scary, create safety in your home environment – spending time, playing, talking and connecting with your children.**
- Be cognizant of your own vulnerabilities and those of your children. An adult or child with a history of anxiety and/or trauma will need to process this news differently than one who is either impulsive or dismissive.

### For children of preschool age:

- Parents need to speak in concrete terms with pre-school aged children. They do not grasp the concepts of “rare occurrences” or geographical differences and **may need reassurance that the War is far away and they are safe.**

**Parents should show increased affection and assurance to young children during this time.**

- If the adults in their world are overtly distressed, they also need to be assured that such emotional outpouring is normal and the parents are still fully present as protective figures.
- Pre-school children may demonstrate distress through play and fantasy. Pay attention to children's play and give them room to work through their feelings through the safety of the play.
- Maintain typical routines and schedules to the extent possible as this promotes a feeling of safety and security.

**For school-age children:**

- School age children have a better awareness of the expanse of time and distance. They can be more easily assured that the battleground and its ramifications are remote and will not directly impact their immediate lives.
- Elementary aged children, especially boys, may have the need for more detailed information. Assess the need to know and keep the lines of communication open.
- The elementary school aged child is capable of feeling sympathy for the war victims and can be taught to express such concern or engage in actions for their benefit. Give children opportunities for actionable responses such as prayer, taking on good deeds for the merit of those impacted, or giving charity.
- **Children in general, but in this age in particular, sometimes respond to sad or shocking news with distraction and disregard. They may return to the adults even days later with more pointed expressions of concern and worry.**
- **Don't worry if your child does not seem to be having a reaction. Everyone reacts differently and it doesn't mean your child doesn't care.**

**For adolescents:**

- Adolescents are capable of "empathy," allowing them to literally imagine themselves in the very predicament of those in Ukraine and Russia.
- In addition to the above, themes of "why do bad things happen to good people," and existential questions may emerge, especially with adolescents. The right to have these questions should be validated and adults can agree that we don't understand G-d's ways.
- The greatest antidote to acts of war, are acts of love, kindness and connection, and this message can be reinforced.

***As previously mentioned, it is next to impossible to precisely pinpoint anyone's response to such tragedy and we urge parents to adapt these recommendations to their and their children's unique circumstances.***

***If anyone has any further questions, please feel free to contact Ohel at 800-603-OHEL (6435) or [access@ohelfamily.org](mailto:access@ohelfamily.org).***

