



INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES SEEKING REFUGE FROM WAR OR CONFLICT IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY

ENGLISH

ALSO AVAILABLE IN:

RUSSIAN
UKRAINIAN

DOWNLOAD FOR FREE: WWW.BEACONHOUSE.ORG.UK/RESOURCES

Who is this information for?



This information is for all those fleeing war or conflict in their home country to seek safety and refuge. You may have already arrived as a refugee; or you may still be on a journey to find safety.

Each person who has been displaced from their home and community will feel different emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel. You may be full of fear; grief; relief; guilt; sadness; anxiety and confusion. You might even feel just numb and shocked right now.

You may have found physical safety, but inside you experience the world and your future as frightening and this can be confusing.

Why is Beacon House writing this?

At Beacon House we have a special interest in understanding the impact of experiencing frightening events on people's bodies and minds. Our therapists also work with people of all ages who have had traumatic experiences.

It is important to us to share this information with anyone who might be helped by knowing a bit more about how trauma affects us, to help them understand the impact of what they are going through.

We also have some information here about how to support the children around you, who will also be experiencing the losses and pain in their own ways (and need different help to heal because they are still developing).



Settling into your
new community might
take some time.

You may have lost a sense of home, a sense of security and control over your life. Having to navigate life in a language that is completely unfamiliar, or only partially familiar, is likely to be exhausting.

Your financial situation is likely to have changed drastically. You might carry a sense of guilt for leaving your home while other people stayed, or even experience people judging you for making a decision to relocate.

You might struggle with decision making and learning to accept help, especially if previously you had little experience asking for help.



*How your body, heart
and mind can be impacted*

You have survived a deeply profound traumatic experience.

Most people who survive trauma react in very understandable ways as they try to recover, protect themselves from more harm and make sense of what has happened to them.

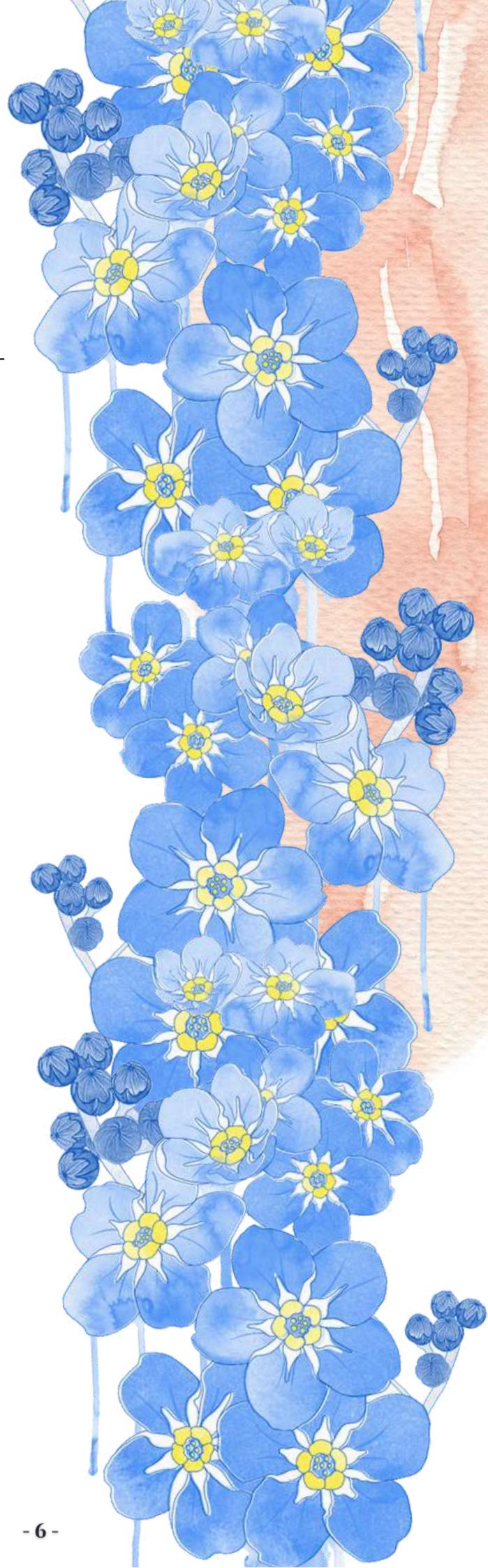
Here is what people commonly notice after trauma, as you read this, see if anything resonates with you.

How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

FRIGHTENING EXPERIENCES THAT COME BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN

Before you left your country, you probably saw, heard, felt and smelt very frightening or shocking things. Even if you didn't see anything directly, you would have feared for the safety of your family and friends and imagined what terrible things were happening around you.

These experiences become 'frozen' in our nervous system, which means they get stuck in time. They can come back to us, when we are least expecting it, even when we are safe now.

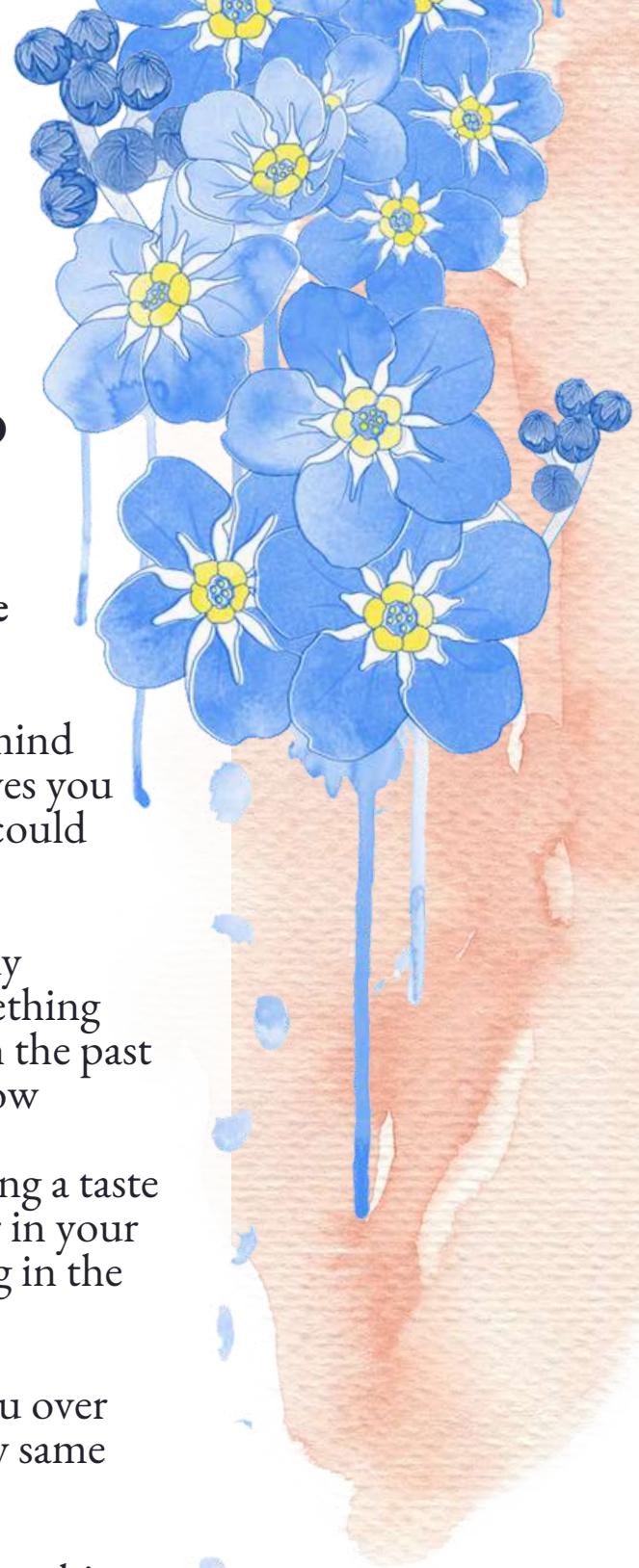


How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

FRIGHTENING EXPERIENCES THAT COME BACK AGAIN AND AGAIN

You (and if you have children, this is true for your children too) may notice things like:

- Suddenly having a picture in your mind of something frightening which gives you great anxiety and fear. The picture could be quite clear or really blurry
- From nowhere, having a whole-body experience where you feel like something frightening that happened to you in the past is happening all over again, right now
- Unexpectedly smelling a smell, tasting a taste or hearing a sound that was familiar in your home country, but is not happening in the present
- You have nightmares which take you over what happened, or give you the very same feelings of fear
- Having a sudden memory about something that happened when you were in danger, or even from earlier in your life if there were other times that you felt scared
- Finding that your whole body and mind is washed over by incredible fear, terror or anxiety and not being able to explain why. Your heart might race, you may feel very tense or sick, you might want to run away or feel frozen to the spot

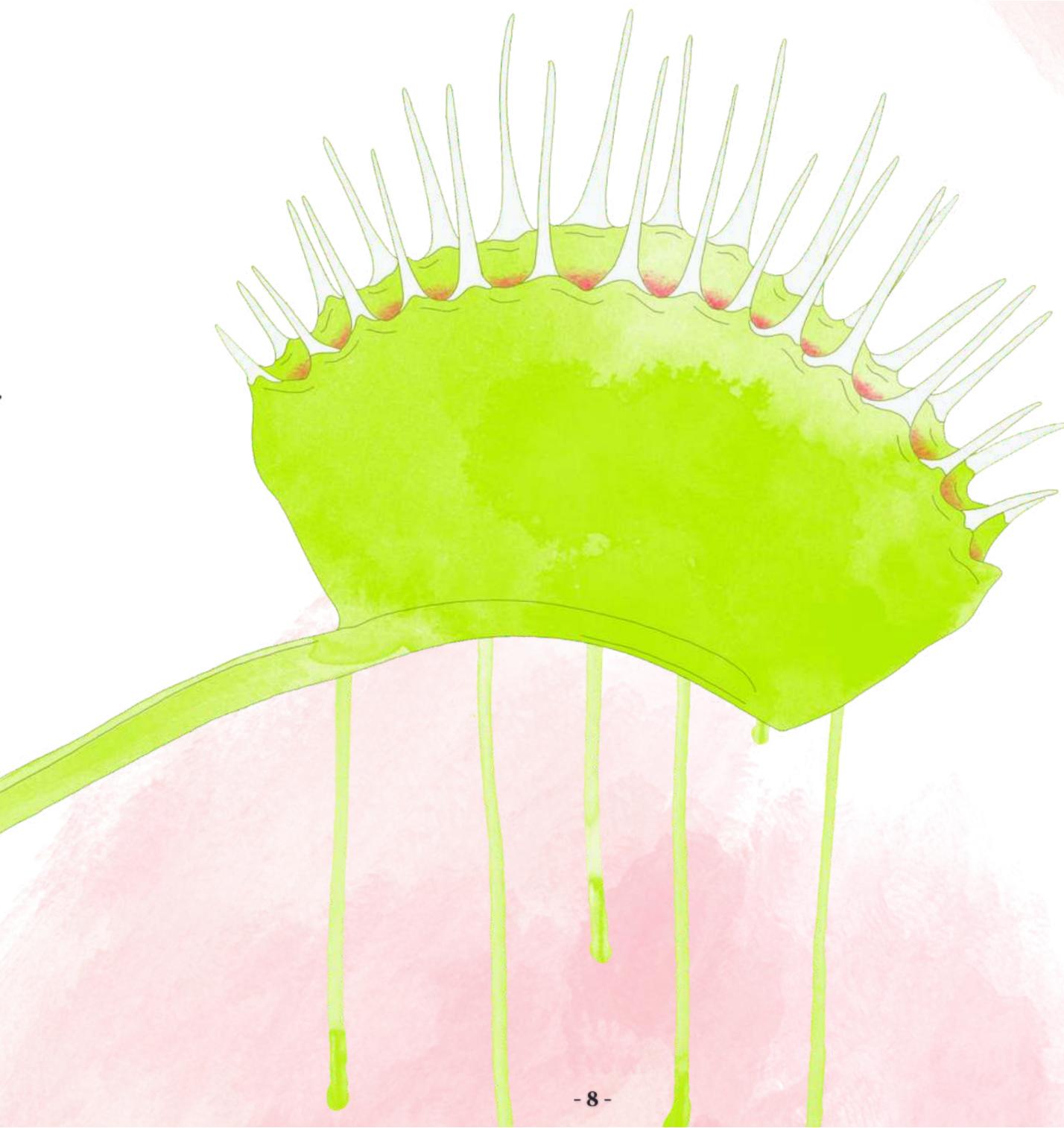


How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

WANTING TO STAY AWAY FROM REMINDERS

Our mind and body are very wise – they give us signals to stay away from anything that might be dangerous. When we have survived trauma, our mind and body go onto ‘high alert’ which means that lots of things (even safe things) are seen as possibly dangerous and we instinctively want to avoid those things.

We particularly want to avoid things that remind us of what we have been through. All of this is our body and brain trying to protect us which is very important in the short term, but can make it harder to heal as time goes by.



How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

WANTING TO STAY AWAY FROM REMINDERS

You, or your child, may notice that:

- You do not want to talk or think about what has happened. You might be finding this information really hard to take in for this very reason
- You have a very strong urge to stay away from places, people, activities that remind you of what has happened. You may want to avoid seeing the news about your home country; or seeing images such as your national flag; or talking to people you care about who have not got to safety yet
- You might do the opposite of this and try and find out as much as you possibly can about the situation in the country you have left and flood yourself with details and information about places, people and the impact of the war
- Your mind might do a very clever thing – which is to make you feel numb for some or all of the time. This is an instinctive way to avoid the reality of the pain you are in and it is perfectly okay and normal to feel nothing
- You might find that your memory has gaps in. You can't remember either blocks of time when you were in danger or very specific details. This is your brain's way of literally blocking out information that is too hard to bear right now. Be reassured that those memories are not lost, they will come back to you when you are ready



How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

FEELING BRACED AND PREPARED FOR DANGER ALL THE TIME

When our life or the lives of those around us have been threatened, we become braced for danger. Our nervous systems get ready to run or fight for our lives again and even when we reach safety, this ‘preparation for danger’ state does not switch off.



How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

FEELING BRACED AND PREPARED FOR DANGER ALL THE TIME

You, or your children, may notice:

- You are jumpy and easily startled
- You feel restless and agitated
- You can't fall asleep easily, or you wake up lots from your sleep
- You are irritable and angry and you find yourself snapping at others
- You are always anxious and your body just cannot relax



How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

CHANGES IN THE WAY YOU FEEL AND THINK

When something profoundly traumatic happens to us, it can change our world view and sometimes it can change how we see ourselves and others.

You (or your children) may notice:

- You have strong waves of fear, guilt, shame, terror, relief, elation, anxiety, confusion, sadness, desperation, panic and every other emotion available to humans
- You particularly feel guilty about surviving or leaving your loved ones and your community behind you
- You struggle to enjoy anything or to feel pleasure or happiness
- You cannot trust others at the moment and you cannot trust that the world will look out for you
- You don't know yourself anymore, you don't know who you are, or who your child is



ZONING OUT

One of the clever strategies that our brain has, is something called ‘dissociation’. Dissociation is when we instinctively zone out from ourselves and what is happening around us. It’s a way of coping with overwhelming feelings and it can last anything from a few seconds to hours at a time.

You (or your child) may notice:

- Feeling foggy and spaced out, as if you are in a dream
- Seeing yourself from above, in an out-of-body experience
- Hearing voices and seeing things that aren’t there
- Having time pass with no memory and becoming confused about who you are, where you are and what time it is
- Doing things that you have no memory of doing
- Reverting back to a much younger age and losing some of your fully developed adult skills

How your body, heart and mind can be impacted

MAKING SENSE OF ALL THESE STRUGGLES

**It's important for
you to know in
your heart that:**

- These reactions are completely normal and very common in anyone who has survived trauma and loss
- These feelings will not last forever
- If you have none of these experiences, then that is also completely normal!





How to take care of yourself and others

We are now going to share some ideas about how you can take care of yourself and the people around you who are also suffering.

These ideas can be equally helpful for adults and children and we look at some ideas specifically for children a little later on.

An important wisdom to hold in our hearts is: *To look after our children, we must first look after ourselves.*

Because people manage their emotions and experiences in different ways, there are lots of suggestions on the pages ahead. We know they won't all work for everyone and so you might want to read them through and see which connect best with how you are feeling or how you (or your children) have managed hard or scary times before.



How to take care of yourself and others

REMEMBER THE BASICS

When our body is under huge stress, it is too easy to forget the basics of self-care – yet they are so important to keep our mind and body in balance.

Where possible remember to:

- Drink water regularly
- Rest as much as you can
- Have a sleep routine and sleep as much as you can at night
- Eat well and regularly
- Avoid too much exposure to the news



How to take care of yourself and others

TALKING

When we are carrying trauma, we often have an urge to avoid talking about what has happened. This is understandable.

However – talking to someone you trust (over and over again) about your story can really help your brain to process your experiences. In other words, it will help your brain to sort out all the thoughts, feelings, body sensations and memories and you will be less likely to feel haunted by your memories in the future.

How to take care of yourself and others

BREATHING AND SLOWING DOWN

We can find ourselves getting very busy in times of stress, because our body is on high alert and we instinctively don't want to stop because when we do, our emotions may become overwhelming.

Try to:

- Let yourself have times in the day when you slow right down. Try sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and taking some slow, deep breaths. Just notice what comes up for you and know that whatever you feel will pass.
- Breathing can be an incredible way to balance the nervous system. Try out a routine where you take 5 minutes, a few times a day, to take 10 long, slow breaths.



How to take care of yourself and others

WRITING

Writing is another way to help your brain sort out everything that is troubling it. Consider keeping a daily journal of everything you are thinking, feeling and remembering. This can be a wonderful way to start making sense of what you have been through.

If you don't feel like writing about yourself, you could try writing stories about other people, or writing poetry. It doesn't have to be good! And you don't have to let anyone else read it unless you choose to.

DRAWING

Some people like to get their thoughts and feelings out through drawing, painting, doodling or using their hands in other creative ways.



How to take care of yourself and others

STAYING CONNECTED

You may be in an unfamiliar country surrounded by unfamiliar customs and a language that perhaps you don't speak or understand. This can be a very lonely and frightening place. How can you stay connected to the people around you and the people you love?

Can you try:

- Joining an online community of people from your country or region in your area
- Keeping in touch with your friends and family
- Cooking food that brings you comfort (ask other people from your country or region about where you can buy ingredients you need)
- Reading books in your language
- Listening to music in your language
- Joining English language classes (most councils have put in place face-to-face and online ESOL classes)
- If you have children, their schools might be a good source of information and support for you too

Supporting your children



You may be with your children, or taking care of someone else's children. They too will be carrying the trauma, loss and displacement that you are and, as they are young, they may be finding it even harder to make sense of. Children are also very resilient and with the support of adults around them will usually heal well (and often more quickly than adults).



Here are some ideas that you (or your host family or child's new school if they have one) can try out:

Supporting your children

VALIDATE YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS AND REACTIONS

Sometimes we find ourselves trying to help our children by reassuring them with comments like “It’s okay, you don’t need to worry” or “don’t be silly, it’s all over now”. While we mean well, these reassuring words can feel confusing for children, because inside they feel so different.

It can be really helpful to accept whatever feelings and thoughts your child shares with you. Help them to see that their reactions are normal and that it is safe for them to feel and say anything to you.



Supporting your children

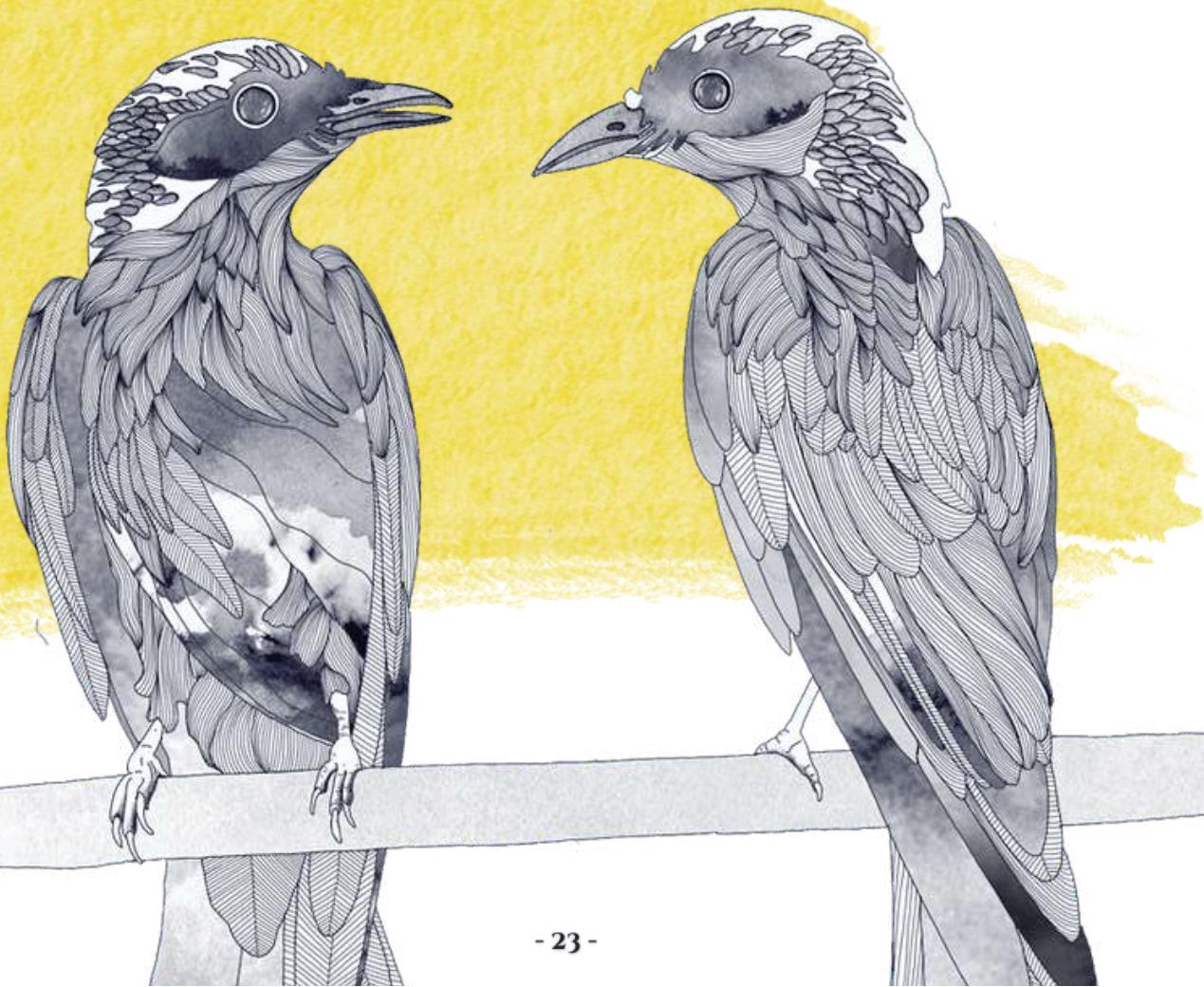
VALIDATE YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS AND REACTIONS

You might want to offer comments like:

"I understand that you are feeling scared. I feel scared too and we are right here together"

"No wonder you feel confused. We have been through so much and everything feels different now"

"Of course you worry about our family who are not with us. This situation is a very big worry for all of us. You are not alone in that feeling. It's so tough isn't it?"





Supporting your children

CONNECT THEM TO THEIR NEW SAFETY

After you have let your child know that you see and hear their pain by accepting it, you might want to help them to connect to the safety they have now.

Depending on your particular situation, you could say words like:

*“And while you feel that worry,
remember that we are safe now. We are
out of danger, and we are together”*

*“Remember that our family are safe now,
even though they are not near us they too
have found somewhere to stay while the
war is happening”*

*“Know that you are safe, you are alive
and that we have survived this”*

*“Your teachers, our host family and the
people around us here want to take care of
us. We are safe here”.*



Supporting your children

TALK ABOUT GEOGRAPHY

Younger children in particular have a limited sense of geography and distance. They may not understand how far away they are now from the conflict in your home country.

It could be helpful to share some information with them about how far away the conflict is from where you are now. You could talk in miles, hours, countries:

“We are many countries away from the war here. The war is not going to come here and we are safe in this country”

“Our country is thousands of kilometres away from where we are now. It’s hard to know we are so far away from home, but good to know that we are so safe from war here”

If you have access to a map or even a globe, you could show them visually as this may help children understand distance.

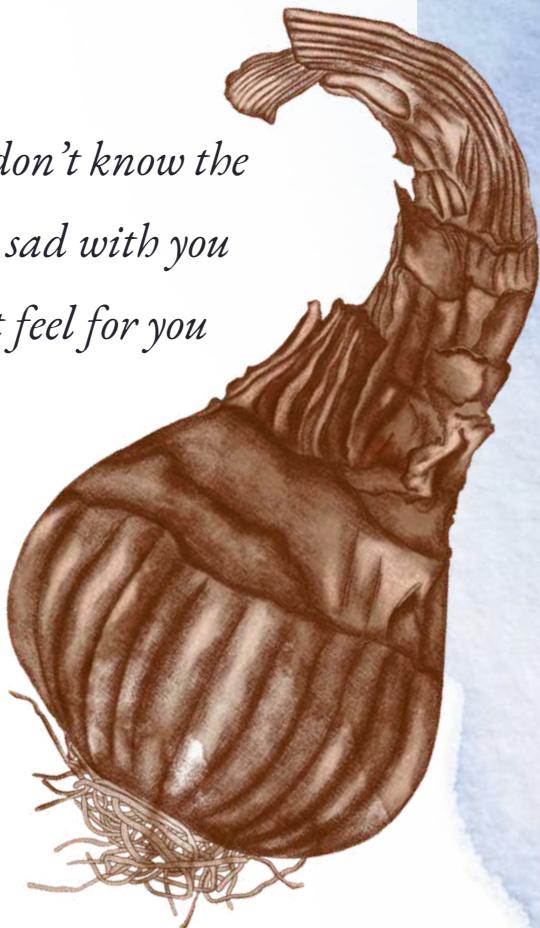
Supporting your children

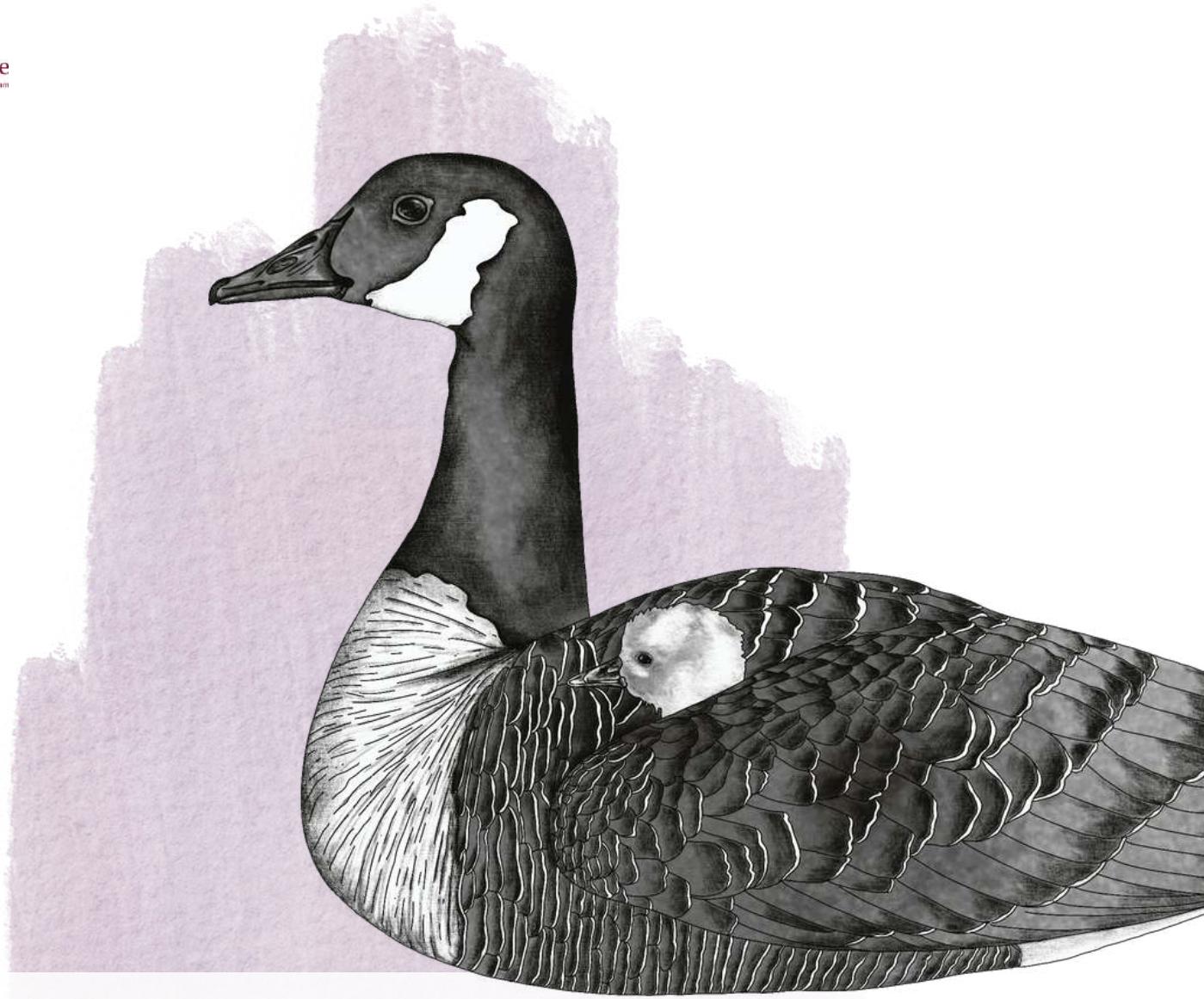
IT'S OKAY NOT TO KNOW

Your child is likely to ask you questions that you don't know the answer to. It is okay not to know and it can be helpful to stay honest and clear with your child.

You might say something like:

"That's a very good question. I don't know the answer at the moment and I'm sad with you that we don't know. How does it feel for you that we don't know?"





Supporting your children

LIMIT THE AMOUNT OF EXPOSURE IN THE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Your child is likely to feel distressed if he or she sees images and hears stories of the ongoing conflict in your home country and this might be true for you too.

Try to limit the amount of distressing imagery you are both exposed to, particularly on social media, and try to share information with your child about the news through conversation. This way, you can check in with them about their feelings and questions as you share the information.



Supporting your children

FIND THE HELPERS

As you and your child talk about the war, or watch the news together, see if you can focus their attention on the helpers.

Talk to them about the doctors, the humanitarian aid routes, the neighbouring countries welcoming families as their guests. Imagine with them how it might feel to be a helper at such a difficult time and how much the helpers are supporting families who are still feeling scared.

Supporting your children

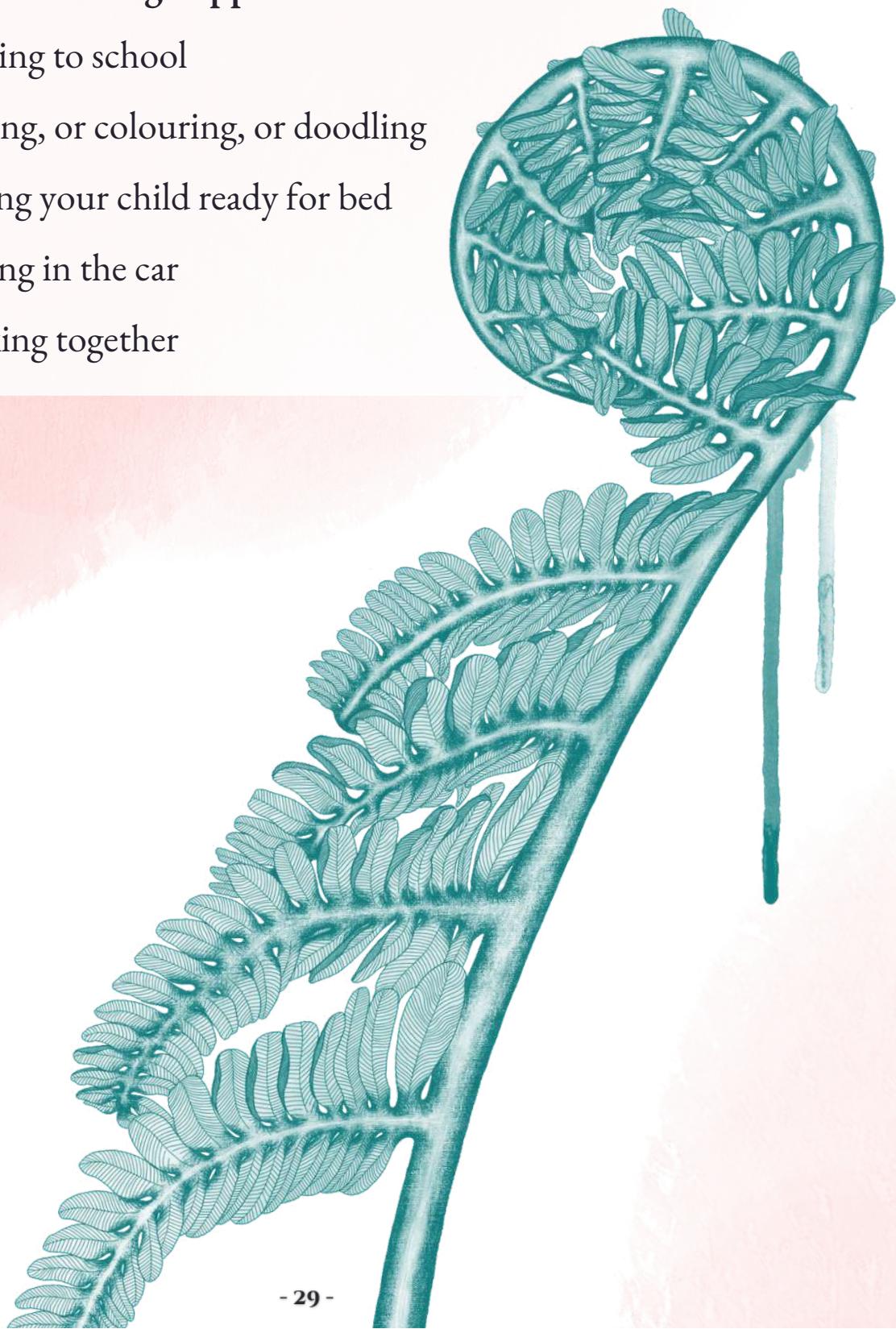
BE CURIOUS

Children often hold back from difficult conversations, especially if they feel worried about upsetting you because they are worrying about how you are.

Remember that children often feel freer to talk about their emotions when they are *doing something* with you.

Sometimes the best talking happens when:

- You are walking to school
- You are playing, or colouring, or doodling
- You are getting your child ready for bed
- You are driving in the car
- You are cooking together



Supporting your children

BE CURIOUS

Here are some conversation starters. Pick the ones that feel right for you and your child:

- What thoughts do you notice go round your head?
- What feelings do you notice go round your heart?
- When you feel upset, where do you notice it in your body?
- What do you feel about....
- What do you miss the most about home?
- Who do you worry about?
- Do you have any questions that you are not sure if you can ask?
- What does your body want to do when it feels stressed or sad?
- When and where are your feelings the hardest?
- How do you feel about yourself that you feel this way?
- I wonder if you ever worried about how I am?



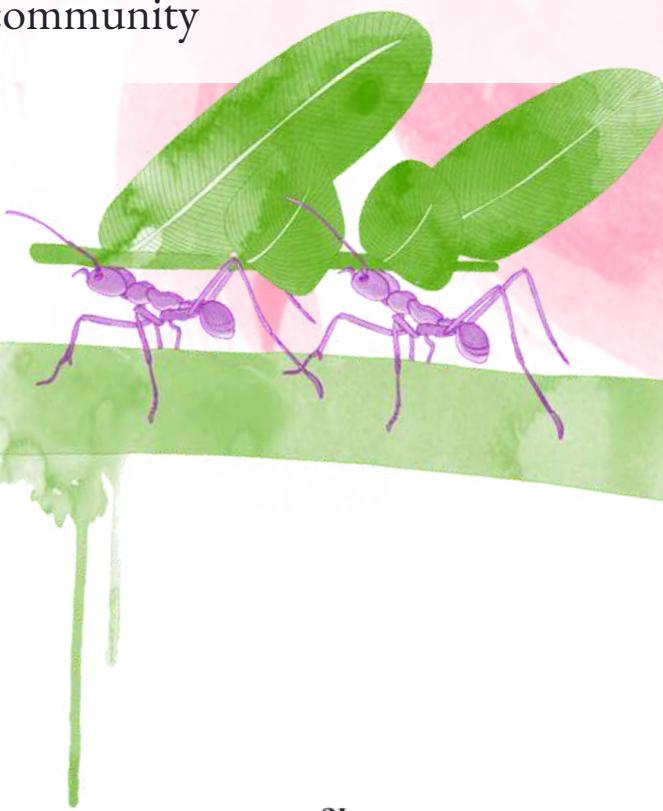
Supporting your children

TAKE SOME POSITIVE ACTION TOGETHER

One of the hardest things about being displaced from your community and home can be a feeling of helplessness. You might want to consider doing some simple, gentle activities with your child to give you both a sense of ‘doing something’ for those who are suffering because of the war.

For example:

- Lighting a candle together and wishing for peace
- Pray together if you have a faith or spirituality
- Write a letter or draw a picture to send to those who are still in your home country or fighting
- Join your local hub of volunteers supporting other families who have left their country
- Offer to cook something from your country to share with your hosts and your new community



Help your child to express and manage their distress



Children often struggle to use words to express how they feel. In fact, when we are carrying trauma, adults find this a struggle too.

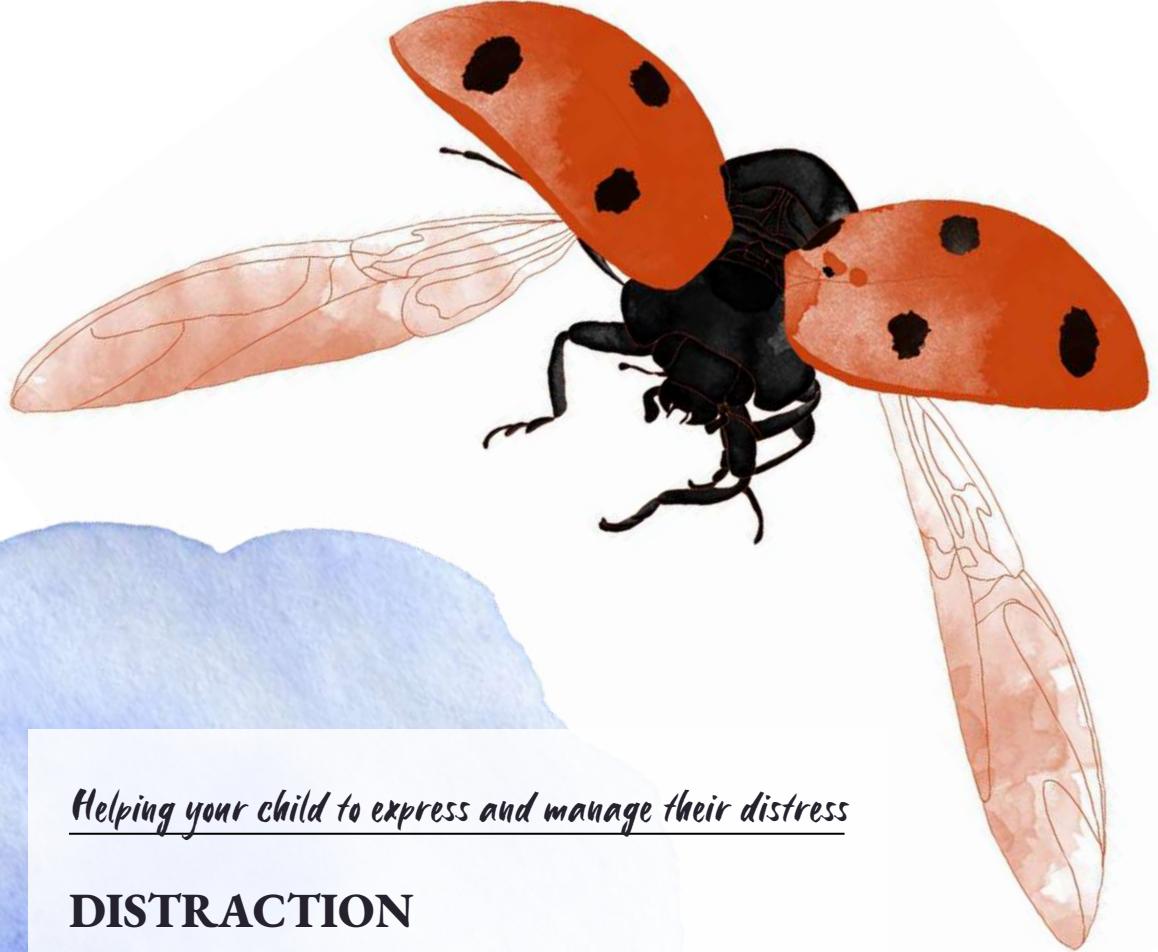


Here are some ways you could help your child to communicate and make sense of their thoughts and feelings:

Helping your child to express and manage their distress

CREATIVITY

- Playing
- Drawing
- Painting
- Dancing and movement
- Music and Rhythm



Helping your child to express and manage their distress

DISTRACTION

- Playing word games together
- Singing your favourite songs
- Watching your favourite programmes on the internet



Helping your child to express and manage their distress

GROUNDING

Grounding is a way of being with your child that helps them come back to the safety of their ‘here and now’:

- Get them moving – go for a walk, throw or kick a ball
- Offer them a familiar and comforting smell on a piece of clothing or a teddy
- Ask them to say out loud 3 things they can see, hear and feel
- Giving them something to chew that has a strong flavour
- Hugging or holding them tightly and rocking them
- Taking 10 deep breaths together
- Laughing or smiling about something together (a fun memory or something on TV or online)



Helping your child to express and manage their distress

RE-CONNECTING THEM TO THEIR SAFETY

- Ask them where and with whom they feel most safety at the moment?
- Find out what they can do that helps their body feel the most relaxed?
- What can they carry with them to connect them to safety? A picture, a small object, a piece of fabric with perfume or an essential oil on it?

Helping your child to express and manage their distress

KEEP YOUR SPECIAL CONNECTION ALIVE

When children are under extreme stress, they need close connection to their parents and important adults more than ever.

Consider:

- Let them know they are not alone. Say things like “*you are not alone. I am right here by your side*”
- Drawing a heart (or another meaningful symbol) on your hand and their hand as they go off to school
- Give them a special object that they can take to school that reminds them of you
- Humour and play are wonderful connectors. See if you can bring playfulness and light-heartedness into your relationship
- Tell your child they are loved very much and that they are safe.
- Bring them close – give them hugs, hold their hand, snuggle up together
- Repair – it is impossible to get it right all the time. Repair is the bridge back to connection with your child again and again



For lots of people, the information and ideas above will be enough to stay steady or feel more stable. For some people and particularly those who have experienced trauma in their early lives and time before the war, a more specialist approach might be needed.

If you are worried about a child, their school is the best place to start by letting them know your worries and asking for support in getting the right help.

For adults, your host family may be able to support you to access more specialist help from mental health services or charities. If you have a faith community, leaders there might also be able to support with this.

With thanks and gratitude to Inna Bruce for her contributions

THERE ARE MANY FREE RESOURCES
AVAILABLE FOR YOU TO DOWNLOAD AT
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