

War in Ukraine

Tending to your and your children's mental health



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**Advice about how to talk
about the war in Ukraine and
how to care for your and your
children's mental wellbeing.**

Given the current situation, it is natural to feel worried, overwhelmed and anxious. Every day we are being exposed to the distressing news of what is happening in Ukraine, and the uncertainties of what this war might lead to.

This booklet will hopefully provide you with some advice about how to better cope during this difficult time and how to best help children in your care.





Supporting the children in your family

Children will hear things and pick up on any tension or fears felt by people around them, even if you are trying to shield them from what is going on. This is likely to be very unsettling for them, especially if they have previously experienced trauma or loss. They may find these intense feelings overwhelming, and struggle to manage them.

So, what can you do to support them?

Don't avoid the topic

Please don't pretend that nothing is happening in an attempt to protect them. It is inevitable that children will hear about the war in Ukraine, whether it is in school, from friends, the radio, the news, or social media. If conversation about war is hushed at home, children will think that the topic is taboo and that they can't talk about it with you. They might internalise their anxiety instead, which could lead to distressed behaviour, poor sleep, or increased worries, to name but a few examples.

Have an open conversation

Give them space to ask questions and try to answer them in a clear and age-appropriate way. **Listen to their concerns.** Giving them accurate information and facts can ease their anxiety. For example, in the case of younger children, you could show a world map and where Ukraine is. Spend some time establishing what they already know, if anything, and where they learned it. It is important that you stay calm when you are having these conversations. Children often mimic the feelings of their caregivers.

Talk about feelings

Ask the children in your family how the situation in Ukraine makes them feel, and reassure them that it is **normal to feel anxious**. Resist simply telling them 'not to worry', as it might make them ashamed of feeling that way, and it doesn't encourage conversation. Instead, look out for signs that they are worried. Then gently comment on this and give them space to talk about their feelings if they want to. Let them know you're here for them, and ready to listen. Talking about their emotions can help children better process them. You can also share how you are feeling, but be careful in your choice of words, so as not to further scare the child. For example, instead of saying "I am terrified about the situation", you could say "I feel upset about the situation."



Limit access to media

Distressing images can be very shocking, especially to children. Try to limit their access to the news and TV, especially if they are very young. With older children, remind them to get information from reliable sources, and talk about **healthy consumption of the news and social media**. It is very tempting to spend hours scrolling through negative news and stories. This is called doom scrolling. Suggest that they remove notifications (*instant updates on the situation in Ukraine*) and instead schedule a specific time to check the news or social media. With older children, you could perhaps do this together and then check how everyone is feeling.



Looking after mental wellbeing

Organise or suggest enjoyable activities that support mental wellbeing. For example:

Offer plenty of **physical activities**, such as kicking a ball in the park or the garden, or even playing on the Wii Fit or doing an online dance class/yoga session if it is a rainy day.

Encourage them to spend **time with friends**. It's even better if they're engaged in physical activity, such as playing tag or football.

Make sure they get plenty of **quality sleep** and that their phones are turned off during the night, so they are not tempted to spend hours reading the news or social media. Ensure they have access to healthy food and are drinking plenty of water.

Encourage them to take action. Kindness and caring for others can create positive feelings and ease anxiety. Help them fundraise and donate to charities and organisations supporting people in Ukraine. Younger children might want to draw a picture for peace, or make a card to send to refugees. If the child is old enough, you could also volunteer together at a refugee centre to sort out donations, or join peaceful protests against the war.



What about Russia?

If your foster child is from Russia, or has Russian family, there is a possible risk that they could be **bullied** at school. This could be very confusing and distressing for them, particularly if they are too young to understand the political situation. If the situation arises, talk to your supervising social worker about strategies to put in place.

Make it clear that the situation has nothing to do with them. Tell them that it is unacceptable for them to be treated unkindly because of where they are from. Talk to their teachers, if bullying is happening at school.



Bear in mind that a child with Russian family may have grown up with very different views to your own, as Russia may at times be portrayed differently by Russia media versus other media. Be understanding of this difference, whilst encouraging the child to see things from other perspectives.

What if my foster child has links to Ukraine?

If your foster child has Ukrainian family, you need to be **particularly sensitive about the topic**, particularly if their family is still living there. They may want you to make assurances about the safety of their country or their family, and sadly you can't do this. Talk to your fostering team about the situation in the first instance.

They may be **desperate to help**. Try to find safe and positive ways to do this, such as sending donations.





Looking after yourself

Dedicate time on a regular basis to check in on how you're doing.

Ask yourself questions such as: Do you feel tense these days? Are you struggling to get to sleep? Do you have more negative thoughts than usual?

Remember to prioritise self-care

This will be for the benefit of everyone in your family: you cannot expect to be able to look after other people if you neglect your own wellbeing. The following tips may help with this:

- **Take care of yourself.** Try to eat healthily and drink enough water.
- **Put your phone down.** Remove notifications to the news to limit your exposure. Avoid graphic content and only consult reliable sources of information. Limit how often you check social media and the news, for example to twice a day. Put time restrictions on your phone, so that the app is 'blocked' after that time. If you can, do something relaxing after reading the news.

- Try to build in time for **exercise**. If you do not exercise regularly, then try to start with gentle movements. Being physically active with the whole family, even if it's just a quick game of musical statues or keepy-uppy, is a great way to keep everyone positive.
- Try to have a **good sleep routine**. Limit tea and coffee, especially in the late afternoon and evening. Avoid watching or reading the news just before going to bed.
- Talk to your family and friends about how you are feeling. Spending time with people we like can really help with mental wellbeing.
- Practise meditation and mindfulness: for example, you could do some colouring, gardening or breathing exercises.

Focus on what you can control

So many things happening now are outside of your control. You can't control the future or what governments are doing. You can't control how the children in your care are going to react. And you can't control the very natural feelings of anxiety. The most helpful thing that you can do is to focus on what you do have control over: **your behaviour and how you respond to things.**





What if one of us is incredibly overwhelmed, or has a panic attack?

When feeling overwhelmed or starting to feel a panic attack coming, it is very easy to further feed the anxiety. **Breathing can be a very efficient tool** in these situations. Taking control of your breathing relaxes your body. And once your body is relaxed, it will be easier for you to feel a sense of calm and control.

Here is a little exercise:

Focus on your breathing. Take deep breaths in and out. Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds (count as you breathe). Then breathe out through your mouth for 6 seconds. Continue doing this for a few minutes to calm yourself down.

Close your eyes and think about something, someone or somewhere that makes you happy.

After the attack has finished, please try not to feel guilty or embarrassed. At times like this, feeling overwhelmed is very common.

For children

If this happens to your child, you could teach them the same breathing techniques (it helps to breathe along with them). Again, tell them that feeling anxious is a perfectly understandable emotion.



Where to find more information



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FosteringTraining.com is an online training website that provides practical, engaging and informative courses designed for foster carers and social workers. Easy to use, learners can access all our 100+ CPD accredited courses anytime, anywhere, from any device.

BBC NewsRound. The BBC offers a child friendly version of the news. It is aimed at 6 to 12 year olds.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>

NHS. This website by the NHS offers 5 practical steps to mental wellbeing.
<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>

Mind. This website provides support in relation to mental health. Part of their website is dedicated to children aged 11-18. <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

YoungMinds. This website is similar to Mind. They also have a blog page about talking to children about the war in Ukraine.
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/blog/top-tips-for-talking-to-your-young-person-about-the-events-in-ukraine/>

Shout. Shout is a free text service providing mental health support. The service is confidential, won't appear on your bill and is available 24/7. If you need help, text 'SHOUT' to 85258.

Calm or Headspace. These phone applications offer many meditation and relaxation exercises. Some of these are available for free.

Cosmic Yoga. They offer great short yoga sessions ('Super Yoga') on Youtube as well as story-based ones, all aimed at kids.
<https://www.youtube.com/c/CosmicKidsYoga>

