

Anticipatory Traumatic Reaction as a Framework for Understanding the Response of Children and Adolescents to the Russia-Ukraine Military Conflict

Ricardo Phipps, Ph.D.¹

Abstract

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Clinical Disorders* (DSM 5.0) depicts trauma related disorders narrowly as resulting from direct exposure to traumatic experiences. Given the pervasive access to news available in society, individuals are often aware of the possibility for traumatic exposure before it occurs. High utilization rates of social media for news consumption makes children and adolescents especially vulnerable to psychological outcomes that mimic responses to trauma. In this position paper, I discuss Anticipatory Trauma Reaction as a frame for understanding how children and adolescents may respond to approaching danger and outline some recommended interventions for helping professionals, with particular focus on the exposure of Ukrainian children and adolescents to new stories about the build-up of Russian military forces along Ukrainian borders before explicit invasion began.

Keywords: anticipatory trauma reaction, children, adolescents, news, social media

Critics of the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder given in the most recent iteration of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Clinical Disorders* (DSM 5.0) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) have highlighted the restrictive nature of the definition of these two clinical responses to traumatic exposure (Pai, Suris, & North, 2017). Researchers and clinicians highlight other trauma-related phenomena, such as vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) and intergenerational trauma (Sigal & Rakoff, 1971), that do not involve direct exposure to traumatic experience but involve indirect exposure through learning about the traumatic experience through family members. The DSM 5.0 explicitly states that diagnosis with posttraumatic stress disorder must involve in person exposure to life threatening events and precludes only having been exposed to the traumatic event through television or other media (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Researchers and clinicians continue to study ways to categorize and recognize traumatic responses that fall outside the parameters of the DSM 5.0.

Children's and Adolescent's Consumption of Negative News

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which began in February 2022, happened after a long build-up of Russian military forces on the borders of Ukraine (Aloisi & Daniel, 2022). Television viewers, social media users, and consumers of other news outlets in Ukraine watched the concentration of military forces for weeks and heard the predictions made about the meaning of these actions based on intelligence collected from various intelligence sources. Children and adolescents in Ukrainian homes and schools listened to the anxious conjectures of parents and school personnel about the possibilities for future aggression and for substantial impact on their lives. Swart (2021) stresses that members of Generation Z, made up of people born after 1995, are huge consumers of news found on the social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Given this access to news and current events from the internet as well as television and other outlets, children and adolescents in Ukraine witnessed an accumulation of military resources that might eventually be used to attack their country but with little or no agency for self-protection and self-defense.

¹ Coppin State University, Baltimore, MD 21216 USA. rphipps@coppin.edu (410) 951-3517

There would be varying levels of understanding about the implications of the approach of the military forces based on age, maturity, and other factors, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that children and adolescents, like their parents, felt a certain amount of powerlessness to influence the fate of their country. A wide range of reactions to the impending destruction is possible, and these reactions might align with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that characterize posttraumatic stress disorder. Hopwood et al. (2022) have coined a term to describe this future-focused distress that can result from continuous viewing of media reports of possible disasters—anticipatory traumatic reaction.

Van Der Molen and De Vries (2003) propose that children are able to follow and understand news starting around 8 years of age, including responding to negative elements in news. Given this conclusion, references to children in this paper will apply to children 8 years of age or older. In response to this vulnerability discussed by Van Der Molen and De Vries to the negative elements in news, the field of constructive journalism has arisen as especially relevant to children's consumption of news. Constructive journalism involves two primary components, positive emotions and solution-based reporting (Kleemans et al., 2019). Regarding negative news, such as the impending invasion of Ukraine, focus on positive emotions can take the form of featuring survivors of a tragedy or actions taken to help those who suffer. Solution-based reporting involves presenting a complete narrative showing a positive end to the news narrative. Traditional news outlets can edit and regulate reporting such that news can be child-appropriate when children are a part of the target audience; however, the nature of social media news is such that anyone can contribute and opine about the news cycle, making the utilization of a constructive journalism approach impossible. Children across cultures are more vulnerable to traumatization than adults (Rozanov&Rutz, 2021), particularly traumatization caused by the viewing of very graphic images of tragic experiences of war, terrorism, or natural disasters.

Anticipatory Traumatic Reaction

Anticipatory traumatic reaction, defined as future-focused distress which can arise because of news reports and social discussion of large-scale threats, is largely driven by uncertainty and unpredictability about future occurrences of the threats that could personally and directly impact the consumer of the news report. In particular anticipatory traumatic reaction evokes thoughts about decreased safety for oneself and others along with a perceived need to prepare for possible future trauma, which could manifest as cognitive rehearsing of possible responses, warning others, constant seeking of updates about the anticipated threat, or gathering emergency provisions (Hopwood et al., 2022). In a study of third and tenth graders who watched warnings of televised news about a predicted earthquake on the New Madrid fault line in the US South in 1990 (which never happened), a significant number of participants reported elevated stress-related symptoms in anticipation of a natural disaster (Kiser et al., 1993). Symptoms included sleep disturbance, nightmares, generalized fear, and concerns about safety of self and loved ones, varying by development level. In the case of the concentration of Russian forces around the Ukrainian border in late 2021 and early 2022, international news outlets reported on this occurrence, covering both Russian explanations that the forces were there only to carry out military exercises and intelligence from Western sources which stated that an invasion was imminent (Aloisi& Daniel, 2022). Memories of previous Russian military aggression against Ukraine likely heightened anxiety about what could happen again. While the impact of this late 2021 and early 2022 occurrence on the political leaders of Ukraine, on Ukrainian business people, and Ukrainian parents is easily considered, the impact of the build-up on the psychological wellbeing of Ukrainian children and adolescents may receive significantly less attention. Using the construct of anticipatory traumatic reaction, I propose that children and adolescents, who have their own experiences of learning about the threat of military conflicts, undergo unique distress about imminent danger and are in need of interventions and supports to mitigate the effect on their mental health.

Lava et al. (2022) outline some of the possible consequences of war on children, many of which can be anticipated before military aggression intensifies, such as separation of children from parents and other loved ones because of army recruitment, death, or families splitting due to migration. Other possibilities include disruption of school, decreased access to food, restrictions on movement, and suspension of utilities, such as electricity or cellular phone service. Of these possible outcomes children are limited in the degree to which they can shape these outcomes, resulting in feelings of powerlessness.

Hopwood et al. (2022) studied the efficacy of a number of interventions for anticipatory traumatic reaction, using an adult sample with an equal number of men and women. The interventions they considered were distraction, mindfulness, cognitive reframing, probability correction, intentional optimism about the future, and focusing on the positive, with mindfulness and probability correction showing the most significant results for reducing the levels of anticipatory traumatic reaction assessed. In the case of mindfulness, which invites individuals to focus on the present in a non-judgmental manner, some decrease in arousal and anxiety can be experienced through continued practice (Zeidan et al., 2010). Probability correction involves countering the tendency to engage in catastrophic thinking by inviting individuals to consider the low likelihood that they will be affected by the threatening situation. Given the details of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, probability correction would look differently depending on the part of Ukraine in which an individual lives, with those in Western Ukraine realistically assessing their risk as lower than those living along the Russian-Ukrainian border. The effectiveness of mindfulness to reduce distress would likely lessen as news reports are seen of bombings and casualties in other areas. The question of how to decrease anticipatory traumatic reaction in children still remains.

In their formulation of trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), Cohen and Mannarino(2008) propose a very scripted approach for how to treat posttraumatic stress in children and adolescents that includes conjoint parent-child interactions with the purpose of significantly reducing symptoms of PTSD after traumatic experiences. One of the components of the TF-CBT model is safety planning, which involves helping children become more comfortable with their capacity to protect themselves if danger of victimization returns. Safety planning is a direct counter to the feelings of powerlessness that accompany childhood traumatization and that can characterize anticipatory traumatic reaction. The literature on resilience focuses on understanding the factors that influence how individuals, including children, will adapt to stressful, traumatic situations. Masten and Barnes (2018) note that nurturing family members, collaborative problem solving, and family flexibility are key to supporting children's response to traumatic stress. Because anticipatory traumatic reaction recognizes the potential for PTSD outcomes before the trauma has occurred and recognizes that some PTSD outcomes may result simply from the expectation of the trauma occurrence, helping professionals and parents are in a position to lessen the impact of perceived threats of danger using similar intentional strategies that are effective in fostering resilience and countering feelings of powerlessness.

Recommendations

As children and adolescents consume news from traditional outlets and from social media outlets about possible threats to collective safety, such as military aggression, I propose that parents and other trusted adults consider the following to stem anticipatory traumatic reaction:

Collaborative Safety planning—to parents, it may seem less anxiety provoking for children to remain sheltered from the reality of possible future trauma exposure, especially if there is any chance that the expected traumatic event may not materialize. Children are very observant and often realize that the possibility of danger exists by reading the indirect communications of adults. Frankish and Bradbury (2012) propose that, when the details are withheld about traumatic experience, children and adolescents often make assumptions about the intensity of the experience and tend to assume scenarios worse than the reality. Since withholding information can lead to catastrophizing, parents should consider discussing possible dangers with their children and allowing their children a role in contingency planning if the possible danger actually occurs. This solution-focused collaboration mitigates feelings of powerlessness and instills some sense of hope for the future.

Parental/family discussions with space for thoughts and questions of children—while there is still a need for conversations limited to adults in families facing possible traumatic exposure, parents should consider involving their children in transparent conversations about impending danger. Because children and adolescents are likely receiving reports of news from social media or directly from peers, transparent conversation within the family affords parents the opportunity to correct any misconceptions and to provide a safe space for their children to process their fears and other emotions. Knowing there is a reliable and caring family support system is a significant protective predictor of trauma resilience.

Historical and cultural context—Providing full narratives to children as they struggle to understand how and why certain events develop as they do can be a helpful scaffold as children continuously process new layers of the situation. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Lemish and Gotz (2022) propose that adults explain the pre-war history and strategies deployed to prevent war, also explaining in an age-appropriate fashion the cultural dynamics that undergird the conflict.

Conclusion

Choosing to discuss distressing news reports with children and adolescents rather than attempting to shield them from the news reports allows young people to openly communicate their emotions, ask clarifying questions about any confusing aspects of the news reports they have already heard, and find support for any realistic solutions they can execute to exercise some limited control over the situation or over their response to the situation. The construct of anticipated traumatic reaction recognizes that the expectation of a tragic event can result in significant distressing symptoms in children and adolescents but also acknowledges the possibility for the effectiveness of intentional strategies to diminish these distressing symptoms.

References

- Aloisi, S., & Daniel, F. (2022, March 1). *Timeline: The events leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine*. Reuters. Retrieved March 15, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/events-leading-up-russias-invasion-ukraine-2022-02-28/>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Cohen, J. A., & Mannarino, A. P. (2008). Trauma- focused cognitive behavioural therapy for children and parents. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 13*(4), 158-162. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-3588.2008.00502.x>
- Frankish, T., & Bradbury, J. (2012). Telling stories for the next generation: Trauma and nostalgia. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 18*(3), 294-306. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029070>
- Hopwood, T. L., Schutte, N. S., & Loi, N. M. (2022). Interventions for anticipatory traumatic reaction: a pilot study. *Clinical Psychologist, 26*(1), 63-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13284207.2021.2006573>
- Kiser, L., Heston, J., Hickerson, S., Millsap, P., Nunn, W., & Pruitt, D. (1993). Anticipatory stress in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 150*, 87-92. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.150.1.87>
- Klemans, M., Dohmen, R., Schlindwein, L., Tamboer, S., NH de Leeuw, R., Buijzen, M. (2019). Children's cognitive responses to constructive television news. *Journalism, 20*(4), 568-582. <https://doi.org/10.21177/1464884918770540>
- Lava, S. A., de Luca, D., Milani, G. P., Leroy, P., Ritz, N., & de Winter, P. (2022). Please stop the Russian-Ukrainian war—children will be more than grateful. *European Journal of Pediatrics, 1-3*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00431-022-04444-5>
- Lemish, D., & Götz, M. (2022). The next time is now! How children and media professionals must respond to Russia's war in Ukraine. *Journal of Children and Media, 1-6*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2022.2054524>
- Masten, A. S., & Barnes, A. J. (2018). Resilience in children: Developmental perspectives. *Children, 5*(7), 98-114. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children5070098>
- McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). Vicarious traumatization: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 3*(1), 131-149. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00975140>
- Pai, A., Suris, A. M., & North, C. S. (2017). Posttraumatic stress disorder in the DSM-5: Controversy, change, and conceptual considerations. *Behavioral Sciences, 7*(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs7010007>
- Rozanov, V. A., & Rutz, W. (2021). Psychological trauma through mass media: Implications for a current “pandemic-infodemic” situation (A Narrative Review). *World Social Psychiatry, 3*(2), 77-86. https://doi.org/10.4103/wsp.wsp_90_20
- Sigal, J. J., & Rakoff, V. (1971). Concentration camp survival: A pilot study of effects on the second generation. *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal, 16*(5), 393-397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674377101600503>
- Swart, J. (2021). Tactics of news literacy: How young people access, evaluate, and engage with news on social media. *New Media & Society, 1-17*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211011447>
- Van Der Molen, J., & De Vries, M. (2003). Violence and consolation: September 11th 2001 covered by the Dutch children's news. *Journal of Educational Media, 28*(1), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358165032000156400>

Zeidan, F., Johnson, S. K., Gordon, N. S., & Goolkasian, P. (2010). Effects of brief and sham mindfulness meditation on mood and cardiovascular variables. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, *16*(8), 867-873. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2009.0321>.