

Holiday season fun...?



Children with a trauma background will likely need extra support and understanding during the holiday season. Particular stresses over the holidays might include a loss of structure and routine, seeing stress in others, unfamiliar situations and people, sensory overload (e.g. too much noise), issues around family contact or memories of previous experiences of celebrations and the holidays.

Around this time, some behaviours you might see are:

- Re-engagement in behaviours you haven't seen for a long time (regression)
- Poor impulse control (e.g. opening presents too early)
- Having difficulty listening, following instructions and remembering rules
- Rapid mood shifts – *excited* can quickly turn into being *overwhelmed*.
- Changes around eating (e.g. excessive eating, loss of appetite or food hoarding)
- Asking lots of questions and sometimes the same question repeatedly
- Being clingy or fearful of separation from safe adults or objects
- Sleep difficulties & nightmares

Here's an example of a child (without a trauma background):

- I walk into the lounge room and see a group of people I haven't met very often - before I know it my stress response has started, and I've frozen still
- All the sights, sounds, smells and feelings come flooding in
- My brain scans the situation and compares it to past experiences. Yes, this might be a threat - it matches previous experiences of being with unfamiliar people and I definitely need to look at this a little more.
- I'm very cautious - I really don't like groups of people, and definitely not ones I don't know, but I have not experienced trauma in the past so I am not overwhelmed.
- This level of stress is actually useful. Just in case, my body is instructed to get ready for a potential threat. My breathing and heart-rate is getting faster, blood is beginning to pump to my legs in case I need to run away, my pupils are dilating so I can see better. As this does not go outside what I am able to cope with, **I am able to remain calm** and engage my rational brain.
- The rational part of my brain sends back the message to be brave, this doesn't look life threatening, *'let's just calm down and look at this situation a little better'* - so I take a deep breath, slow my heart rate a little, and take a step forward to have a closer look.
- Here I see my favourite aunty. I'm reminded of that awesome summer we spent down at her beach house and good memories come flooding back. I smile, take a big breath in relief, move over and say hi.
- While I may be on edge for a little while because there are some unfamiliar people here (and I can't remember some of their names!) this experience is not likely to have any long lasting effects. My hormone levels will decrease relatively quickly to normal baseline amounts. My stress response systems will settle (**I can handle this level of excitement**) and I will be able to continue on for the rest of the day.



Here's the same example for a child with a trauma background:

- I'm already a little **anxious**, and on edge, because of my higher baseline levels of stress hormones. Plus, I'm in a strange house and I'm not sure what all this Christmas fuss is about – apparently we get presents and heaps of food?!?
- I walk into the lounge room and see a group of people I haven't met very often (some of them I haven't even met once) - before I know it my stress response has started and I've **frozen still**.
- My brain is helping me to produce more stress hormones, but this extra influx on top of my already high levels is triggering an even stronger **stress response**.
- Sensory information from my environment is being pumped into my brain – all the sights, sounds, smells and feelings come flooding in – I'm starting to feel **overwhelmed**.
- My brain is scanning the situation and comparing it to past experiences. Things are starting to look scary. I don't like this feeling, I've felt it before, I feel like I'm in danger, therefore, I **MUST** be in danger. My brain starts to **shut down**.
- I start to lose control of my thinking. My brain is swamped with sensory information. I'm not sure if this is safe. More and more stress hormones are in my body - my breathing quickens, my heart rate increases and my pupils get bigger. **I'm at crisis point**.
- My brain begins to shut down - starting with the part that controls rational thought. My own body is telling me that there's a threat. I have no time to check if I'm right or not, I just have to trust what my body is telling me.
- I might **lash out** and throw something across the room towards the strange 'enemies' because I can't rationally process who these people are. I might **turn and run** in the opposite direction. I may stay **frozen** on the spot, fearfully watching. I may completely **shut down** and disengage from the world. I may do a combination of these things.
- Whatever my survival response is, this experience is likely to have a large impact on my day. I will likely **need help to calm**. My stress hormones are going to take a long time to fall and will stay elevated if I continue to be stressed. I'm also likely to remain even more on edge than normal for a long time.

How can we help?!?



While this may be a stressful time, it can also be a time of great joy and new/exciting experiences it can also be a great opportunity to help children learn that the world is usually safe.

Put on your own oxygen mask first!

When children are stressed, they need us to do their rational thinking for them – it's nearly impossible to do this if you are stressed out as well! Try to develop an understanding of your own stress and triggers. What are some ways that you can maintain your own levels of calm?

- Can you build in opportunities for quiet time and relaxation in every day? The calmer you are, the better able to handle stressful or exciting situations
- Find time for your own self-care. You need to be how you want your child to be – what things will help you to relax and stay calm. Even little things can help like making sure you have your morning cuppa, take a few deep breaths and remember to smile!

Help by preparing

- Ahead of time, it may be useful to have a conversation with children regarding their family of origin
 - What did they used to do at Christmas time?
 - Are there any traditions you can continue?
 - Are there any new ones you can start all together?
- We know that when children are escalated they are saying *“I need help and I don’t know what to do with what I’m feeling”*. Try to develop an understanding of your child’s stress responses ahead of time.
 - What are their specific triggers and reactions?
 - What do they need you to do when they get triggered?
 - Is there anything helpful they can do themselves?
- Take some time to practise before hand. You can try some role plays or help the child to practise their breathing while calm. This will make it more likely that they will be able to stick to the plan under stress. You can also help them by reminding them of what you practised together.
- Help the child to identify a safe person (or people) who the child is comfortable staying with.
- Develop a “special sign” with your child so that they can indicate when they need some support. This could be a word, or a subtle signal of some kind.
 - What happens if things go wrong or get too much?
 - How will you help them?
 - What do they need to do? (be specific)
- If possible, visit or drive past the house the party will be at before-hand to eliminate a little of the unknown

Stick to the flight plan

Change can be very scary so try to plan and prepare for any changes ahead of time. Keep as many routines as possible. Try to remain planned in your responses and stick to what you have agreed with the child before-hand. Remember they may become overwhelmed quickly and need you to be their thinking brain.

- Is there a job that the child can be in charge of at the party? Redirection and distraction can sometimes help
- This can be a tricky balancing act. They need you to be consistent, predictable and calm... while still being able to be flexible and creative.
- Consider what your child is feeling right now? What do they need? What are they trying to communicate? How can you best respond to this situation?
- Help them to connect their feelings/body sensations and behaviours – “wow I can see you have a lot of energy in your legs there – are you starting to feel excited about the party?”
- Stay with them and use “time in” e.g. spending time with them engaging in a calming activity.

When the dust settles

- Try to take some time after a stressful event to reflect on the day (maybe not straight away as everyone might be really tired!).
 - What happened?
 - Who was that person?
 - Was it stressful? Which parts in particular?
 - Did our pre-planned responses help?
 - Do we need to tweak it for next time?
- What did we do really well? Was there anything that would have reduced the stress even more?

