

Coping after a traumatic event

Children



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Introduction

Following a traumatic or frightening event, such as a car crash, pandemic, natural disaster or acts of violence (including assault, abuse or a terrorist attack), it is normal for children to experience difficulties. Each child will react differently and for some children, these issues will resolve gradually over time. However, for others these issues can continue to interfere with a child's everyday life.

This leaflet aims to provide information on common reactions that you may notice in your child, practical advice for supporting your child as well as information on services that provide guidance on supporting children after a traumatic event.

Common psychological reactions:



The feelings following a trauma can be very strong and frightening. As children try to understand what has happened and “get their heads around” what they experienced, the following reactions are common:

- Some children may feel shock, unsettled, anxious or fearful. They may also feel:
 - Irritable, anger, guilt, shame
 - Low mood, depression,
 - Hopelessness, helplessness
 - Confusion
 - Numbness
- They may experience repetitive and distressing memories, intrusive thoughts/images or they may re-experience the feeling of being scared.
- Children’s concentration may be reduced, and they may develop communication difficulties.

- You may notice some behavioural regression. With small children, trauma can lead to a loss of developmental milestones; children may also become more infant-like, clingy, thumb suck, bed-wet and/or disobedient.
- Some children may begin to isolate themselves and disengage from nursery or school.
- Some children will avoid talking about the subject completely, while others will struggle to stop thinking about it and how they could have prevented or changed the outcome. They may start to imitate the trauma, also.

It is natural for a child to have any or all these feelings, though they may vary in intensity according to your circumstances.

Common physical reactions:



Some children may report physical complaints such as:

- Stomach aches or headaches
- Sleep problems
- Heart racing
- Low energy
- Easily startled
- Tension, aches
- Loss of appetite.

Many of these are signs of anxiety, tension, or stress.

Things you can do to promote recovery:



It is quite normal for a child to be upset, even for quite a while after a frightening event. There is consensus that doing things that make a child feel safe and connected and addressing a child’s immediate physical and social needs can help their psychological recovery in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event.



What **should** I do?

DO help children to understand what has happened. Talking through the incident can help to make sense of the traumatic event and correct misunderstandings. For example, some children may think that it was their fault.

DO be available to talk with children, as and when they are ready. In addition to the above, talking can help children to adjust and make sense of what has happened, to feel less alone with their worries and to regain a sense of control. Finding a way for the child to express their experience, whether through talking, drawing, writing, music, dance or simply sharing a space with others can help to reduce the effects of trauma. However, this will need to be done carefully and sensitively; encouraging a child to talk shouldn't be forced and should be guided by the child's own pace.

If someone has died DO explain what this means. Often people take time to accept the reality of a death, particularly if it happened in a traumatic way. Children may need help to understand the death is permanent, that this is something that happens to everyone, and that it has a cause. Some children may

keep asking if the person is coming back, so you may need to do this several times – it is important to be patient and take time to explain it in a clear language.

DO try and make things as normal as possible. Children feel safer when they know what to expect; for example, a child continuing normal activities such as going to school, clubs etc. Exercise, maintaining a healthy diet, relaxation, meditation and activities such as walking, listening to music, connecting with friends can be helpful too.

DO help them to see that their reactions are normal and understandable.

DO look after yourself as well. It may be difficult for you to talk about the event and you may be upset by what has happened also. Be kind to yourself; you may want to talk to another adult about it or seek further support. Sometimes, children find it easier to talk to other adults rather than their parents. Professional help may be required to prevent or reduce the harmful effects of prolonged stress reactions.

When to seek professional help?



Many children find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce over time (1 – 2 months) and they become happier and more confident again. For some children, their symptoms can get worse instead of better over time and develop into mental health problems, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. If, after a traumatic event you are concerned about the symptoms a child is displaying, please seek advice from a health professional (such as a GP).

You should in the first instance approach your own GP, who will be able to advise you on options and put you in touch with someone who can help. This may be:

- **A counsellor in your GP surgery** (if available)
- **Local specialist trauma and bereavement services** which can be accessed by your GP e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health services.
- **If you or your child have been involved directly in a community disaster**, special support services may be arranged. Do not hesitate to contact them if you want to talk over your concerns.

Where to seek professional help:



For further information about post-trauma support options for children and young people

British Red Cross Helpline
redcross.org.uk
Tel No: 0808 196 3651

The support line was set up to provide support to communities and people in need. It gives people without a support network someone to talk to and can help people access things they may need like food, medicine and emotional support. It is open 10am – 6pm every day and is free and confidential.

ChildLine
childline.org.uk
Tel No: 0800 1111

You can talk to ChildLine about anything, no problem is too big or too small. It's confidential and you don't have to give your name if you don't want to.

Child Bereavement UK
childbereavementuk.org
Tel No: 08000 288840

Child Bereavement UK supports families and educates professionals both when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, and when a child is facing bereavement.

Cruse
hopeagain.org.uk
Tel No: 08088 081677

If you are a young person and someone you know has died CRUSE has many support options available to you, including their website designed for young people by young people. It includes information and forums where young people can share their experiences. You can also get in contact via e-mail or telephone to speak with trained volunteers.

General Practitioner

If you are worried that a child is very distressed or continues to be distressed after a month or so, you could seek further help from your GP. They can check your child's health and talk to you about who else could help.

MIND
mind.org.uk

MIND is a charity providing information and support to people facing mental health difficulties.

MindEd minded.org.uk

MindEd is a free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults created in partnership with Health Education England. They have useful resources on single event trauma and complex trauma.

NHS

The NHS have compiled a helpful list of helplines for support and expert advice relating to mental health, violence, addictions, relationships or crime.

nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/

The NHS have also created an interactive quiz where you answer 5 questions to get top tips and advice for you. Now tailored for the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, too.

nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/your-mind-plan-quiz/

NHS England england.nhs.uk/london/our-work/help-and-support/

NHS England shares information on how you may expect to feel in the days and months ahead following a traumatic event, and to help you understand and have more control over your experience.

Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event

This website describes the kind of feelings that children may have after a trauma, what to expect as time goes on, and mentions some ways of coping and coming to terms with what has happened.

Samaritans www.samaritans.org **Tel No: 116 123**

Whatever you may be going through, a Samaritan will face it with you. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Children's Society www.childrenssociety.org.uk/

The Children's Society focus on helping children facing many issues in their lives.

Young Minds Parent's Helpline **Tel No: 0808 802 5544** youngminds.org.uk/find-help-for-parents/

Young Minds Crisis Messenger <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/get-urgent-help/youngminds-crisis-messenger/>

Young person looking for help and support can text the YoungMinds Crisis Messenger, for free 24/7 support across the UK – text 'YM to 85258'. All texts are answered by trained volunteers, with support from experienced clinical supervisors.

Youth Wellbeing Directorate <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/>

The Youth Wellbeing Directorate provides a list of free local and national organisations for anyone up to the age of 25, along with information on wellbeing you may find helpful.

Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>

Information, advice and guidance on supporting bereaved children and young people during the Coronavirus out-break. This includes their updated services and opening times.

Other support available

(e.g. local and national support lines following a specific traumatic event):

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Disclaimer

This information reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing.