After the event

Supporting children after a frightening event

This leaflet is designed to help adults to understand how children and young people might react to frightening events, and to give some ideas of what might help. Further copies are available from *www.traumaticstress.org.uk*

Reactions after a frightening event

Children and young people sometimes witness or are involved in things that they find very scary or stressful such as accidents, violence or terrorist attacks. As they try to understand what happened and "get their heads around it", the following reactions are common:

- Nightmares
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into the mind
- Feeling as if it is actually happening again
- Playing or drawing about the event time and time again
- Not wanting to think or talk about the event
- Avoiding anything that might remind them of the event
- Getting angry or upset more easily
- Not being able to concentrate
- Not being able to sleep
- Being more jumpy and being on the look out for danger
- Becoming more clingy with parents or carers
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches
- Temporarily losing abilities (e.g. feeding and toileting)
- Problems at school

It's quite normal to be upset, even for quite a while *after* a frightening event; children and young people (and adults) may feel angry, sad, guilty, confused, or any combination of feelings. Some people continue to feel scared, even though the danger has passed. Children and young people worry less if you can help them to see that their reactions are normal and understandable.

Memories of frightening events often start out as pictures and sounds that pop into people's heads when they don't want them to.



The memories may bring with them all the fear and distress that came with the original event.

What can be done to help?

Try and make things as normal as possible

Everyone feels safer when they know what to expect. A frightening event often makes people unsure of what's coming. You can help children and young people feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines as much as possible, and continuing with their normal activities when possible.

Help children and young people to understand what happened

Children and young people need a truthful explanation that makes sense of the main facts, which is appropriate for their age. Even younger children can really benefit from being given a description and explanation of what happened.

Having an understanding of what happened helps in many ways:

- It helps the child to make sense of the upsetting event and to reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness.
- Talking through the events can help to correct misunderstandings. For example, some children may think that it was their fault; others are confused about important

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facts. You can help to avoid this by being clear and open.

- It is helpful for children to be prepared so that they can talk to others about what has happened or answer people's questions, if they want to.
- Thinking things through with your child can also help children to realise that although bad things can happen, they don't happen so often that we need to be scared of them all the time.

Be available to talk with children and young people, as and when they are ready

Sometimes parents and carers try to protect children and young people by avoiding talking about the event. They worry that they will upset them unnecessarily or make things worse. Some people hope that by keeping quiet, children and young people will forget all about the event. In fact, children and people are likely to benefit from talking about what's happened, and they may need adult help to do this.

Talking is usually helpful, but needs to be done carefully and sensitively at the right time for the child or young person. Try and provide opportunities, support and encouragement to help them to talk about it when they are ready to, rather than force them. Some children and young people may want to use dolls or toys, or draw pictures to help them to understand what has happened.



It can be difficult or distressing, but by thinking about, talking about and drawing what happened, you can help children and young people to take more control of the memory and be less afraid of it.

If it's too difficult for you to talk to your child, you could get another adult to help, such as a family member or a trusted teacher. It is helpful if all adults keep to the same story so that the child or young person is not confused.

Answer questions truthfully

Encourage children and young people to ask questions. Try to answer them simply and honestly. They may need to ask the same question several times, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened. If they ask the questions, they are probably ready to hear the answers.

If someone has died, explain what that means

Often people take time to accept the reality of a death, particularly if it happened in a traumatic way. Younger children might need help to understand that death is permanent, that it happens to everyone, and that it has a cause.

Some children will seem to understand that the person has died, but then keep asking if the person is coming back. So it's important to be patient and take time to explain it in clear language (for example it's clearer to say that "John has died" than to say "John has gone on a journey"). You may need to do this several times.

Look after yourself as well

If you are upset by what has happened, it may be more difficult to talk about the frightening event. You might want to talk to another adult about it or seek more support.

When and where to seek more help

Many children feel upset for a few weeks after a frightening event. They may show this in the ways mentioned earlier. But over time, most become happier and more confident again. Some children will continue to have problems several weeks after the event. 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.

For further help or support, please contact:

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