



ROCHDALE
BOROUGH COUNCIL



Guidance for supporting children and young people who have experienced trauma

Rochdale educational psychology service

What is trauma?

Trauma refers to the natural human response to a highly stressful event. It refers to extreme stress that overwhelms a person's ability to cope, where the person's sense of safety and security is undermined. A traumatic event involves a single experience, or repeated, multiple experiences. It is usually something that was unexpected and there was nothing the person could do to stop it such as violence in the home, school or community, medical trauma, natural disasters, neglect, abuse, bereavement and war zone trauma. Anyone can experience trauma; no one is immune.

What happens when we experience trauma?

A broad range of emotional reactions to these experiences are considered 'normal': fear, anxiety, stress, anger, shame, low mood, self-blame, survivor guilt, intrusive thoughts and images etc. Individuals may exhibit the following: avoidance, social withdrawal, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, irritability, aggression, repetitive behaviours, risky behaviours, substance misuse and self-harm.

However, our reactions will vary and will be dependent on a multitude of factors, including the responses of key people around us and the social support structures in place. An important thing to note is that no-one is doomed to long-term emotional distress because of difficult life experiences. There are things we can all do, without specialist qualifications and expertise, to support each other through stressful times.

What can we do?

1) Listen. Listening can be the single most effective thing we can do to

help. Feeling listened to can have an immediate calming effect. Through attentive listening we give the message, "I hear you... you are not alone". Do not feel tempted to jump in with suggestions or solutions, or tell someone not to worry or to calm down.

- 2) Acknowledge their pain/anguish.** Nod to acknowledge you have heard and are trying to understand. Use phrases such as, "That sounds really difficult.... I can understand why you are feeling that way.... I can see that this is incredibly difficult for you...." etc.
- 3) Avoid asking questions about what happened...** instead be led by them and repeat back phrases they use to acknowledge you understand. Silence is ok. Try to avoid feeling pressured to make things right. Being there, listening and showing compassion is often enough.
- 4) Avoid giving opinions** about the situation, particularly political opinions.
- 5) Try to respond to any questions factually.** It is OK to say you don't know the answer, there may well not be an answer.



- 6) Create a sense of safety** – through providing a safe place to go to, maintaining routines and consistency. This creates a sense of predictability at a time when suddenly the world can feel like a scary and unpredictable place. Support them to make plans for the day/week, including doing things they like and being with people who make them feel good.
- 7) Help them to regulate** through providing low demand, enjoyable and regulating tasks in calm areas such as colouring/drawing, making things, listening to music, preparing drinks/snacks.
- 8) Promote social connections** and peer support through enjoyable, collaborative activities.
- 9) Discourage the use of viewing media** coverage where there are graphic images and constant reminders.

Other things to consider:

- We feel much more comfortable talking about our feelings and experiences when we are with familiar people who we trust and feel comfortable with. Time-table in activities for all children for the specific purpose of enabling them to build relationships with each other and with staff over time so that they feel a sense of connectedness and belonging.
- **Reactions to trauma are normal responses to abnormal events and can persist for many weeks/months, hence the need for watchful waiting.** Research shows that counselling/therapy soon after a major trauma is not advisable and may actually make things worse. People can be re-traumatised, which could prevent the recovery process and trigger secondary trauma.

Immediate counselling/ therapy can give the unintentional message that there is 'something wrong' with the person.

- Unless there is immediate risk, referral to specialist services may not be needed. Identify those who have pre-existing vulnerabilities or where trauma reactions are not settling or are getting worse after several weeks/months.
- Don't forget to look after yourselves and the people you are responsible for – this can be distressing and difficult work. Ensure you have support mechanisms and regular supervision in place. Ask for advice and support from colleagues and relevant outside agencies.
- Say if you feel unable to work with a young person or unsure what to do next
- Plan positive things after work and stay connected with friends and family. Leave work at work and switch off the news!

Post traumatic growth

Experiencing trauma does not necessarily mean long-term suffering. Good things can happen following a stressful life event; this is often termed, 'post traumatic growth'. Sometimes, people who face major life crises develop a sense that new opportunities have emerged from the struggle, opening up possibilities that were not present before. Some people experience closer relationships with some specific people, and they can also experience an increased sense of connection to others who suffer. There may also be an increased sense of one's own strength – "If I lived through that, I can face anything" and a greater appreciation for life in general. Some individuals experience a deepening of their spiritual lives and this deepening can also involve a significant change in one's belief system.