

Coping with Disastrous Events

Advice for adults in schools



Introduction

Disastrous events are rare. However, when they do happen, they are often sudden and may be overwhelming for those who are directly affected by them. This leaflet outlines the effects of such events and strategies for dealing with them.

Traumatic stress

Traumatic stress occurs when a person is involved in an event so distressing or frightening that the body's normal emotional defence systems are totally overwhelmed. Serious accidents, such as road traffic accidents, or violent deaths such as murders, fall into this category. All those involved in such incidents are likely to suffer some level of traumatic stress.

How significant can it be?

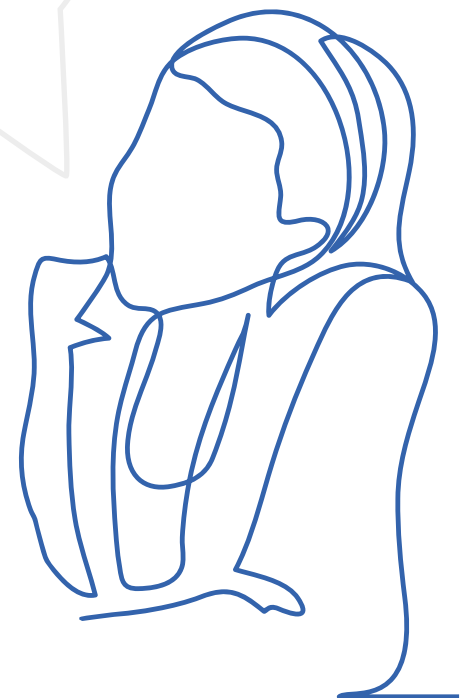
It is now well understood how important it is to take preventative action to deal with the effects of traumatic stress in order to reduce the impact of the long term mental health problems which are caused by Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTS) in vulnerable individuals.

Traumatic stress is a perfectly normal and natural response to an overwhelmingly distressing event. PTS is the consequence of not dealing adequately with the emotional aftermath of very stressful situations.

Typical effects of traumatic stress include:

- Irritability
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Behaviour changes
- Extreme fearfulness
- Anger
- Guilt

If these reactions continue for more than three months then the child may need professional support to deal with the post-traumatic stress.



What are the strategies for dealing with traumatic stress?

While many people can cope with traumatic events on their own it is important for all those that have experienced a traumatic event to have the opportunity to talk through the event in detail in a way that helps to rationalise the event. This also helps to come to terms with what has happened and allow other necessary processes such as bereavement and grief, to take their natural course.

It is now understood that even bystanders and professionals involved in an event need to do this. In the past it was often thought that those very familiar with stressful events, such as police or fire crews, would become 'hardened' to these emotional pressures. The facts do not bear out this assumption. We now know that if these professionals do not receive support in the aftermath of the traumatic incident there are likely to be long term health consequences for them. It is now well recognised that this represents a needless waste of highly trained and valued personnel.

The psychological support offered after a traumatic event is called 'emotional first aid', 'debriefing' or 'Post traumatic stress debriefing'.



Support for young people and children

Children and young people have an equally important need for support following a traumatic event. Those directly and indirectly involved may need to help children come to terms with what has happened.

Whenever possible it is best for the support to be delivered by staff who are experienced in this field and who are used to talking and listening to children. However support should not be delayed because of lack of professional support.

Speed is essential for this type of emotional first aid. It is important that we can listen to all the child needs to say. The child must be helped to talk through all their recollections and worries and encouraged not to hold back to protect adult feelings. This is why it is often difficult for parents, family members, or other relatives to do this for children. Their own distress may make listening to child accounts too painful.

When a number of children are involved, it can help to meet in groups. Such interventions have been shown to be extremely helpful and effective, preventing or significantly reducing longer term problems.

The Educational Psychology Service offers this support to schools as a preventative measure. Please make sure that members of staff are aware of children in your care who may need this help, such as those who have been directly involved in, or have witnessed, a traumatic event.

Contacts and information

Web:

www.kelsi.org.uk/special-education-needs/educational-psychology/crisis-support-service

Grief and Loss Resources

www.theeducationpeople.org/products/partner-providers/grief-loss-and-crisis-support

Email:

Educational.psychology@kent.gov.uk

Phone:

03000 410 100

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