

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 need this help. They will need the help if they have been directly involved in, or have witnessed, a traumatic event.

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.

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This publication is available in alternative formats and can be explained in a range of languages. Please call 03000 41 41 41 for details.

Coping with Disastrous Events

Advice for Parents and Teachers

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 levels 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 (PTSD) in vulnerable individuals.

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

What are the strategies for dealing with traumatic stress?

It is important for all children to have the opportunity to talk through the event in detail in a way that helps to rationalise the event. This also helps children to come to terms with it in their own minds. This will allow other necessary processes such as bereavement and grief, to take their natural course.

Taking these steps will help children who might be vulnerable to PTSD. 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 firemen, 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'.

Children...

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.