



After the Event – Supporting Children After a Frightening Event

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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. This can still be true even if children were not directly involved e.g. saw something on the news or in their local area. As they try to understand it, or “get their heads around it”, the following reactions are common:

- Nightmares;
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into mind (if witnessed);
- 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 on the lookout for danger;
- Becoming more clingy with parents and carers;
- Physical complaint such as stomach or headaches;
- 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 feeling. Children and young people worry less if you help them to see their reactions are normal and understandable.

What can be done to help?

Try to 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 normal routines as much as possible and continuing with their normal activities where possible.

The challenges of lockdown

Currently, this “normality” is complicated by the National Lockdown and that fact that most children are not in school. How you can create a sense of “normality” at home:

- Try to develop new routines within your family for the lockdown period. Predictability increases feeling of safety;
- Try to allow time to connect as a family, e.g. regular activities together;
- Particularly with teens, be mindful of the amount of time they are spending in their rooms by themselves on social media. Time alone, “doom-scrolling” makes things worse;
- Prevent and/or discourage children and young people from searching social media/the internet for details and/or posting things themselves.

Help children and young people 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 that child makes sense of the upsetting event and can reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness;
- Talking through the events can help to current misunderstandings and some might be confused about important facts. You can avoid this by being clear and open;
- Thinking things through can help children realise that, although bad things 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 they will upset them unnecessarily or make things worse. Some people hope that by being quiet, children and young people will forget all about the event. In fact, children and young people are likely to benefit from talking about what happened and they may need adult support to do this. Talking (or drawing) helps children to take 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. For children with additional needs use their preferred means of communication.

Where to start:

Start by establishing if, and what, they have already heard. They may have overheard conversations, caught the news coverage, seen things on social media, or been discussing events with others.

You might say *“Have you heard anything about what happened at...?” / “Have your friends/other children at school been talking about...?”*

You may then follow this up with, *“How do you feel about what you have heard?” / “Do you have any questions about what you have heard?” / “Do you want to talk to me about it?”* (this offer may need to be made more than once and should remain as an open invitation)

“I’m here if you want to talk”

Next steps:

It is important to take the child/young person’s lead – to be available as and when they want to talk - they know what is preoccupying them or what they are seeking answers about. Try to answer their questions 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.

Ask them, *“What would you like to know?”* or *“What questions do you have?”*

If necessary and possible, give them the basic **facts** of what has happened.

Avoid unpleasant and unnecessary detail and showing/allowing them to see images of the event and/or aftermath.

Allow time and space for emotional reactions and respond with acknowledgement, empathy and kindness – cry with them, hug them, acknowledge and validate their fears, anger etc. *“It’s okay to feel sad and cry,” “I can understand that you feel scared – it is a scary thing to hear about”*

Provide reassuring phrases *“It’s an awful thing that happened but thankfully these things are extremely rare”*

Provide reassurance that normal routine activities can and should continue *“It will be fine to go... and meet your friend; to your football match; out for a walk etc”*

Don’t over dramatize events, keep the message simple *“A sad and shocking thing happened. People are looking after those who are bereaved. You are safe”*

Don't forget that knowing what to say is far less important than being able to listen in a sympathetic and supportive manner:

Don't feel that you have to "solve" a tragic situation but do offer reassurance that your child is safe now if this is needed. If it seems appropriate to offer advice, then strategies you might want to suggest could include:

- Talking to their family and friends;
- Crying and expressing their emotions in a suitable safe context;
- Maintaining normal routines;
- Eating normally;
- Taking physical exercise;
- Maintaining normal sleep patterns;
- Talk to friends;
- Listening and playing music;
- Maintaining interests and pastimes
- Think about activities/locations/resources that usually provide comfort and help.

Further support

Most children will only need some brief discussion and then will be able to settle back into normal life. However, some may be more deeply affected and the reactions above may go on for a longer period of time (at least a couple of months). If you notice these signs interfering with your child's day to day life, they may need further support so talk to the SENCo in school who will help you to find appropriate support.

General mental health support for children and young people:

- www.kooth.com Kooth offers emotional and mental health support for children and young people aged between 11 – 24 years and is available up to 10pm every day.
- www.youngminds.org.uk Young minds are a charity dedicated to supporting young people's mental health. They also have a free parent helpline: 0808 802 5544 from 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday.
- **Childline** support for children and young people under 19yrs 0800 1111
- **ARC** Counselling for Children and Young People: <https://arcweb.org.uk/>
- [Every Mind Matters | One You \(www.nhs.uk\)](http://www.nhs.uk)
- childbereavementuk.org
- **sudden** is a charity aimed at supporting people and communities who have suffered a sudden bereavement: <https://sudden.org>

Sources of advice and support available for those who have experienced a bereavement, include:

- **Websites and blogs** – such as [Hope Again](#), a website for young people going through a bereavement, where you can find information, read other people's experiences, and add your own; the [Winston's Wish](#) and [Child Bereavement Charity](#) websites also offer information and advice.
- **Helplines** – such as the [Cruse Bereavement](#) young people's helpline on 0808 808 1677.
- **Your GP** – especially if you're concerned you're not coping, might be depressed, have trouble eating or sleeping, are thinking about hurting yourself, or you're not starting to feel better after a few months: they may suggest you have [counselling](#).
- **Your child's school** – can offer support or signpost to further sources of support.