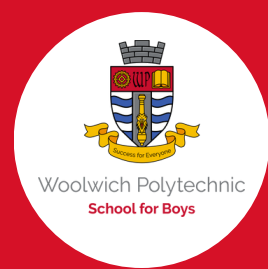


ADVICE FOR PARENTS/CARERS



Following a sad, shocking or frightening event, it is usual to see a range of different responses. For example:

- Children might become fearful or anxious about attending school.
- They might worry about being away from their loved ones.
- They might ask lots of questions about what happened.
- They might want to talk about what happened – this might include sharing stories and ‘gossip’, and sometimes young people can seem ‘excited’ in response to the news.
- They might become withdrawn and quiet.
- They might find it difficult to sleep.
- They might not react at all.

These responses in the short-term are understandable and expected. It is important to remember that everyone is unique and there is no ‘expected’ response. What one child finds traumatic another child may not find distressing. Children will react in a variety of different ways after a trauma.

There are a number of things that you can do to support your child in such situations, based on the principles of psychological first aid.

(1) Acknowledge their feelings

Following sad, worrying or scary events, it is helpful to acknowledge and normalise how children are feeling. The principles of emotion coaching work well for this.

This involves:

- Listening to the child
- Labelling the child’s emotions: “I can see that you are feeling scared because of what happened at the weekend, and you are worried about walking to school”
- Showing empathy: “I would feel scared too”
- Finding solutions: “What can we do to help you feel safer?”

(2) Promote a sense of safety

Restoring a sense of safety is important in the immediate aftermath of a scary or worrying event, as this can help to reduce feelings of distress and worry. Safety refers to both physical and psychological safety. Physical safety can be supported by helping them meet basic need (food, sleep, comfort and closeness). Psychological safety refers to protecting people from situations that may cause them further distress, such as receiving information in an insensitive or uncontrolled way.

(3) Clear communication

To keep safe at a time of crisis, a child or young person needs access to accurate and timely information that is communicated in a way that is sensitive to their developmental level, explained where possible and delivered in an acceptable dose. We suggest you apply the Goldilocks principle of ‘just enough’.

It is likely that individuals will have heard some information about the event. However, this may not all be accurate, and some of the beliefs they have may be causing unnecessary worry or distress. Correcting any misapprehensions is an important intervention.

(4) Promote calm

It is natural for anyone who has experienced a scary or worrying event to feel a wide range of strong, and potentially conflicting, emotions. Provide practical strategies such as calm breathing and relaxation exercises. Other calming actions may involve identifying a quiet space. We have attached some information about calming exercises that you can share with your child.

(5) Help to promote a sense of their ability deal with the situation and that those in their community (e.g. teachers, parents, friends) also have the skills they need to get them through

Individuals may experience a sense of helplessness in response to a scary or worrying event, both in respect of their own ability to manage and in others ability to support them. Help them to have a sense of control and highlight that individuals and communities have existing strengths and resources and that they can utilise.

(6) Create a sense of connectedness

Social connections are essential for helping individuals to recover through gaining emotional understanding and acceptance. You can support connection by ensuring encouraging your children to contact their support networks, such as spending time with their friends and loved family members. Attending school can ensure that they have access to their social networks, supportive teachers and other school staff who they can connect with.

(7) Create a sense of hope

It is important to help individuals to understand that their reactions are normal, and convey an expectation that people can recover from trauma, and you can support people to take one step at a time and to notice small gains so that they can begin to look forward.

Watchful waiting

Most children will recover in a few weeks. However, some children and young people experience longer term difficulties adjusting. It is therefore useful to look out for and be aware of the following changes in behaviour, particularly if they persist 4-weeks or longer after a sad, worrying or scary event has taken place:

- Dreams, flashbacks
- Over-reactions to small issues
- Impulsivity, hyperactivity
- Self-destructive behaviour (e.g. self-harm, substance abuse)
- Jumpy, inability to sleep or relax
- Poor concentration
- Being irritable and grouchy
- Being more alert to threat
- Lack of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Feelings of isolation from family, friends
- Blocking out feelings
- Withdrawing from others
- Physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach pains

If you are worried about your child, please speak to someone in school who can seek support from relevant external agencies.