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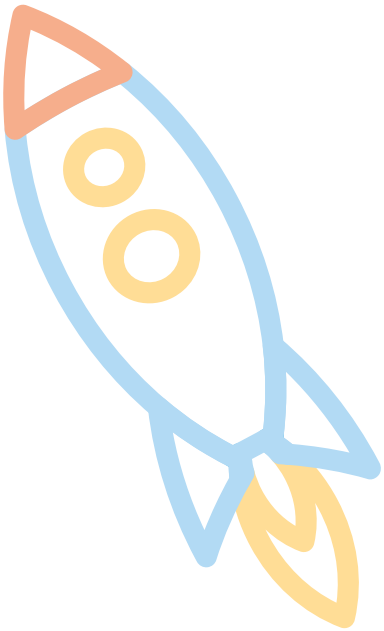
Coming to terms with a frightening event

Information for young people, parents and carers

leeds children's hospital
caring about children



Becoming unwell or getting injured and having to come into hospital can be frightening. Frightening or traumatic events can be difficult to cope with.

After a frightening event, it is normal that you might feel different or have reactions. Some of these reactions might seem unusual or scary. Knowing why they happen can make them less worrying.

This leaflet aims to explain:

- some of the reactions you might experience after a frightening event;
- why you might be responding in this way;
- how you can manage these responses, and
- how to get some help if you need it.

Reactions after a frightening event

Everybody responds differently to upsetting situations. Some of how you react depends on what happened, your age, personality and how you have coped with stressful events before.

Below are **some** common reactions to a frightening event. Children's reactions to trauma vary according to developmental stages.

Pre-school age children	Primary school age children	Secondary school age young people
Disturbed sleep / nightmares	Acting out or recreating the event through play	Flashbacks (memories popping into your mind) and / or 'reliving' the experience (feeling as though it is happening again)
Screaming	Being overly compliant or demonstrating aggression / bullying	Rumination / constant worrying and hypervigilant for signs of danger
Clinginess and separation anxiety	Safety behaviours and rituals / routines to attempt to prevent future frightening experiences	Avoidance of triggers or situations associated with the trauma
Losing abilities / skills or acting like a younger child (e.g. sucking thumb, 'baby talk', wetting and soiling)	Dissociation / seeming to zone out and disconnect from surroundings	Low mood, social withdrawal, school refusal
Freeze response when frightened	Psychosomatic problems - headaches, stomach aches, pains	Short tempered, unable to concentrate, confused
		Sleep difficulties and nightmares

These are normal ways of responding to an unusual, difficult and upsetting event. They usually fade over time but there are things you can do to help you or a child to feel better.

Why do these reactions happen?

These reactions happen because of how the brain works when we are very frightened. When we are very frightened, the brain and body go into 'super safe mode'. At this point, we do not process events / situations as we usually would. Instead, our brains make snapshot memories. These memories are filled with feelings, sounds, smells and sights; however, they can end up mixed up and in the wrong order, like a messy box of photos.

After the frightening event, the brain starts sorting through the snapshot memories. This makes us think about the frightening event, even when we might not want to. This can cause flashbacks and nightmares, and it can feel as though the event is actually happening again.

We may also feel more jumpy and 'on edge'. This is because the brain has still got the body in 'super safe mode'. When we are in 'super safe mode', we are always on the lookout for danger.

It might sometimes feel like these reactions happen for no obvious reason. Other times, it might be clear that these reactions were triggered by something; for example, reactions might be triggered by hospital procedures, talking about what happened, seeing reminders on the TV or going back to where the frightening event happened.

When the brain has organised all the snapshot memories into a clear story, it will not need to go through them anymore. The memories will stop appearing when we do not expect or want them to. The brain will switch off 'super safe mode' and the body will feel less jumpy.

How can these reactions be managed?

There are several ways you can manage your own reactions or support a child with their reactions.

Supporting your child

- Reassure your child that these reactions are normal and happen to lots of children after a frightening event. Remind your child that they are safe and with people who will look after them.
- Answer your child's questions simply and honestly. They may need to ask the same question over and over again to understand the answer and to start to feel safe.
- Let your child know it is okay to tell you about bad dreams, flashbacks, or about the event. Gently encourage them but do not push them. Some children prefer to draw or play rather than talk.
- Distract your child during hospital procedures or if they seem anxious. Find something they enjoy doing that they can focus on.

- As much as you can, help your child to have a daily routine. If they are still in hospital, this might have to be different to their routine at home or before the event; however, doing roughly the same things at the same time each day (e.g. mealtimes, story time and bedtime) will help them feel safe and secure.
- Try to build your child's confidence. Focus on their strengths and the things they can do well, give plenty of praise.

Managing your own reactions

- Don't try to avoid thinking about what has happened. Thinking through the event can help your brain put together the story of what happened. Talk to someone you trust about what happened.
- After a frightening event, people sometimes avoid doing things they used to enjoy or things that are important to them. This might be because they feel very on edge or because they are worried about people asking them questions. Gradually returning to your usual routine will help your mood and provide normality and stability for your child.
- Practise grounding and mindfulness strategies. If you have a flashback or feel like you are going through the event again, remind yourself where you are, that you are safe and that the event is not happening again. This can help you feel less anxious by re-focusing on the present. Look around you - what can you see, hear, smell, and feel? Where are you? What time is it?

- For guided mindfulness and relaxation, there are lots of apps that can be helpful, including the Headspace app, Calm app and Stop, Breathe & Think app.
- Some more ideas for mindfulness and grounding activities are described below. These might be something you and your child can do together.

Using our senses to anchor ourselves in the present

- **Hearing:** listen to and focus your attention on a piece of music, notice and pay attention to what sounds you can hear around you (e.g. a ticking clock, chatting voices, footsteps, trees rustling in the wind).
- **Smell:** a strong smell will draw the focus of your attention. Alternatively, is there a scent you find soothing and comforting that might increase your sense of safety?
- **Taste:** focus your attention on a strong taste - sour lemon, strong mint.
- **Touch:** focus your attention on sensations you can feel, cold (ice / cold water), soft material or bumpy rough textures.
- **Sight:** focus your attention on what you can see in the room around you or in nature, or looking at photos of loved ones.

Playful ideas for grounding and mindfulness with children (and grown ups!)

- **Playdoh:** notice how this feels in your hands, focus your attention on temperature, texture, firmness, weight, smell and colour.

- **Glitter bottles:** put water, washing up liquid and glitter into a bottle - shake the mixture up and focus your attention on watching the glitter slowly settle back to the bottom of the bottle.
- **Mindful eating (can get messy with chocolate!):** first, put the food item in your hand and notice the appearance, weight, smell, temperature and texture. Then place it in your mouth and hold it there. Notice how it tastes, does the temperature and texture change? Begin to slowly move the food around your mouth, pay attention to any changes that happen to the food as you do this.

What will happen as time goes on?

Some people find the reactions stop gradually. Others find the reactions start at a later date; for example, when they go home from hospital. The reactions might also start if friends and family ask questions about the event, when someone sees their injury for the first time, if the injury means they cannot do things they used to enjoy or if they are going back to the place where the injury happened.

The most important thing to do is to look after yourself.

For some people, these reactions settle down quickly. For others, they last longer. If these reactions continue for more than 1 month after the going home from hospital or start later, it might be helpful to get some support.

How can I explain my reactions to other people?

Other people in your life might struggle to understand these reactions. It can be difficult to explain how the frightening event has made you or your child feel. It might be helpful to share this leaflet with important people in your life.

Part of looking after yourself might be seeking practical and emotional support from family and friends. Helping people understand how you are feeling could be an important first step in feeling supported.

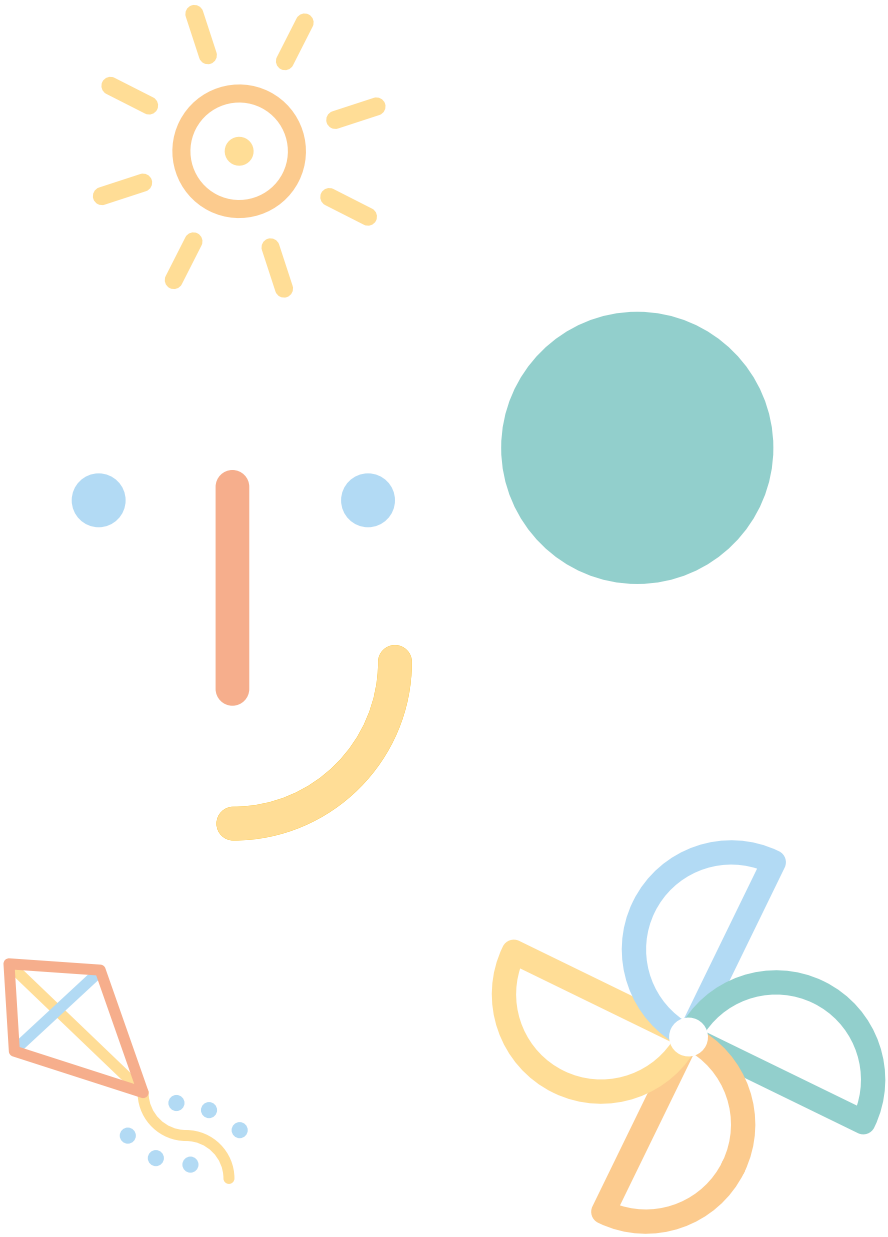
How can I support my other children?

Sometimes, brothers and sisters of a child who has been through a frightening event can also have these reactions, even if they did not see any or all of what happened. You can use the same strategies as on the previous pages to support them.

How can I get more help?

If you, your child or your family would like to access support following a frightening event, you can contact your GP, hospital consultant or care co-ordinator who can arrange a referral to appropriate services. This might include an initial conversation with a psychologist in the hospital. It is very normal for families who have experienced a frightening event to seek additional support from someone like a psychologist.

If your child has been admitted following a traumatic injury and you have any questions, please contact the Children's Rehab and Trauma Co-ordinator on 07500 380752. All others should contact the person / ward / department who provided this leaflet.



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Your views matter

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