NHS
The Leeds Teaching Hospitals
NHS Trust

Children impacted by a major incident

Information for parents and carers

Introduction

You may find this information helpful if you have a child who has been involved in, or affected by, a major incident (such as a large-scale accident, crash, explosion, or bomb blast). It provides information on common emotional reactions that they may experience in the coming weeks, along with tips for supporting them during this time.

Common Reactions

Trauma affects people in different ways, at different times – there is no right or wrong way for your child to think or feel. Common reactions include:

- Feeling tearful or upset
- Feeling anxious, on edge or jumpy
- Feeling irritable or angry
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling guilty for surviving
- Having poor sleep or loss of appetite
- Having poor concentration or feeling disorientated
- Having thoughts, memories or 'pictures' about what happened come into their mind
- Having dreams or nightmares about what happened
- Not wanting to talk or think about what happened
- Temporarily regressing and or losing abilities (e.g., feeding and toileting)
- Playing out or drawing about the event time and time again
- Becoming more clingy to parents/carer, or scared of being alone
- Being scared of things they have not been scared of before (e.g., the dark or closed spaces)
- Having (more) physical complaints without a medical cause (e.g., tummy pains, headaches)
- Struggling with changes or unfamiliar places

These reactions are normal, and understandable. They tend to settle down naturally in the weeks following the event and tend to become less frequent and distressing over time. These reactions are not a sign that they are losing control or not coping. They are part of the adjustment process, which can take time.

What can I do to support them?

- **Listen to them.** Give them the opportunity to talk when they want to. Don't force them to talk if they don't want to.
- **Validate their feelings.** Let them know that their feelings are okay and understandable. Let them cry if needed and show comfort. Encourage them to express their feelings when they feel ready.

It is important they do not bottle up their feelings. Allow safe expressions of anger (e.g., hitting a pillow or shouting loudly in an open space).

- **Remind them they are safe.** Let them know it is okay to be scared or worried, but let them know they are not in danger now, and the trauma is in the past. Try and be consistent and reassuring.
- **Maintain a basic routine.** Try to keep things as normal as possible, by keeping up with their basic routines and normal daily activities; They can be comforting and help them feel safer. Try to encourage them to get enough sleep and eat healthy, regular meals.
- **Take the pressure off where you can.** Does their room have to be tidy, can you get them some time off homework?
- **Reduce media exposure.** Excessive media exposure of the event can be very distressing. Disable phone alerts, and try to keep them from seeing too many graphic images or videos of the event. If they instead wish to stay informed, you can update them with age-appropriate information.
- **Help them make sense of what happened.** Try to help your child understand what has happened by giving a truthful explanation that is appropriate for their age. This may help reduce feelings of confusion, anger, sadness and fear. It can also help correct misunderstandings that might, for example, lead the child to feel that they are to blame. This can also help reassure the child that although bad things can happen, they don't need to be scared all the time.
- **Answer questions simply and honestly.** For example, when there has been a death, some children will seem to accept a death but then repeatedly ask when that person is coming back. It is important to be patient and clear when dealing with these questions: for example, it is better to say "John has died" than "John has gone on a journey". There will be some questions you don't know the answer to, and it is okay to be honest about that.
- **Allow yourself to show emotions and show them you can tolerate their distress.** Children often avoid talking about traumas for fear of upsetting family members.
- **Help them feel safe and relaxed.** Make sure they have things around them that give them comfort (e.g., familiar toys or blankets). You could do relaxation exercises together, such as a slow paced breathing exercise.
- **Encourage them to do things they enjoy.** Plan things every day, no matter how small, even when they don't feel like it. This could include encouraging them to watch their favourite TV show, listening to music, or playing a game.
- **Inform school.** Keep in touch with school/college about supporting a consistent approach.

What next?

If they continue to experience emotional reactions that are distressing them and are getting in the way of their everyday life, then please speak to their GP. They will be able to refer them to their local service for talking therapy.

What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/nhsleedsfft

Your views matter

© Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 1st edition (Version 1)
Developed by: Dr Emma Sellers, Senior Clinical Psychologist
Produced by: Medical Illustration Services • MID code: 20241119_001/BP

LN005946
Publication date: 07/2025
Review date: 07/2028