

## COMMON REACTIONS FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

### HOW PARENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS CAN HELP

When children experience trauma or an overwhelmingly frightening event, their reactions are similar to adults. They may not be able to express themselves in words but you may notice some of the following:

#### BEHAVIOUR:

- Quiet, withdrawn behaviour, including a reluctance to talk or aggressive behaviour
- Reluctance to separate from you including clinginess, not wanting to sleep alone or even unwillingness to go to school
- A return to younger behaviours such as thumb sucking or wetting
- Attention seeking behaviour and even aggression directed towards you
- Avoiding things or places which are a reminder of the traumatic event
- Taking risks
- Self harm

#### PHYSICAL REACTIONS:

- Difficulty dropping off to sleep and/or nightmares once asleep
- Overwhelming tiredness
- Loss of appetite or excessive “comfort eating” or sugary snacks
- Crying
- Constantly alert to the possibility of danger
- Heightened sensitivity to loud noises, easily startled
- Breathing difficulties
- Changes in menstrual cycle
- Nausea and stomach pains, headaches

#### THOUGHTS

- Finding it hard to concentrate especially in school
- Confusion
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unwelcome intrusive thoughts
- Going over the event and thinking what they might have done differently “if only...”
- Vivid recollections
- Re-experiencing sensory impressions eg smells, tastes, sounds which are a reminder of the event
- Brooding on this and other incidents
- Loss of belief
- Memories of the people they knew and loved

## FEELINGS

- Being easily upset by everyday events
- Feelings of guilt at being the one still alive or unhurt
- Shame at not being able to help or being over emotional
- Anger at what has happened or who allowed it to happen or just the fact that it happened at all
- Anxiety
- Fear of harm to themselves and those they love, of being left alone, of breaking down, of the same thing happening again
- Powerlessness
- Sadness
- Grief
- Impatient and bad tempered
- Isolation, feeling that no one else understands

These are all **normal reactions** to an abnormal experience and are likely to fade over time. Most children are resilient and will accommodate to what has happened in the longer term. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends “watchful waiting” for 4 weeks after a traumatic event. It only recommends therapeutic intervention, specifically Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for those whose symptoms do not begin to abate within the month.

## WHAT HELPS

- Talking to others, if any, who were also caught up in what happened and who may be experiencing similar reactions. This is likely to be reassuring and also helps to clarify exactly what did occur
- Being patient – it may take some time to learn to live with what’s happened
- Re-establishing usual routines
- Spending time with family and friends
- Taking care physically including eating well, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep

Useful contacts:

The Samaritans ☎ 0845 7909090

Cruse Bereavement Care (Shropshire) ☎ 0845 606 6812

Compassionate Friends ☎ 0845 1232304

Educational Psychology Service ☎ (01952) 385216

Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service ☎ Telford (01952) 388669