



# Coping with Stress after a Major Incident

Additional information to assist with children.



If a child has witnessed or experienced a traumatic event it is quite natural for them to be stressed. They may be very upset and/or frightened. This should not usually last beyond four weeks.

If symptoms of being very upset continue beyond four weeks, this may indicate Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and it is important to seek help for your child.

## These are typical reactions after a traumatic event:

- Nightmares
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into their mind
- Feeling as if it is actually happening again
- 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 being on the lookout for danger
- Becoming more clingy with parents or carers
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches
- Temporarily losing abilities (e.g. feeding and toileting)
- Problems at school

## How to Help Your Child:

- Try to keep things as normal as possible: keeping to your usual routine and doing normal activities as much as you can, will help your child feel safer more quickly
- Be available to talk to your child as and when they are ready. If it is difficult for you to do this, ask a trusted adult such as a family member or teacher to help
- 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. They can also

help re-assure the child that although bad things can happen, they don't need to be scared all the time

- In the event of a death, particularly a traumatic one, it can be difficult to accept the reality of what has happened. It is important to be patient, simple and honest in response to questions about a death. Some children, for example, 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".

#### **What to look for:**

- Children experiencing PTSD might show that they think differently either about themselves or other people.

They might:

- Blame themselves or show lowered self-esteem

- Describe thinking that they are a bad person or talk about thoughts of deserving bad things to happen to them
- Show less trust in other people and be less able to experience a sense of safety
- Experience overwhelming feelings in the form of shame, sadness and fear
- Avoid situations that they fear could increase their emotional response – i.e. might make them feel more frightened, threatened, ashamed or reminded of the event.

#### **What to do:**

If you have any concerns about your child, it is important to seek help **via your GP**. There are some very effective treatments including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for children and young people experiencing the effects of trauma.