

## The Journey of Recovery: Guidance for Professionals

### Using the animation

The animation has been developed to support educational professionals in understanding and supporting students who have been affected by trauma. It is a general introduction to trauma and recovery and does not attempt to address the impact and implications of surviving a terrorist attack.

The written materials below have been developed with mental health clinicians and teachers to facilitate staff training and discussion.

***Please note:*** *trauma and adversity impact on everyone in different ways and at different times in life. It is important to think about this individually and as a staff team prior to using the animation; some people may be more affected by watching the animation than others. The support provided to staff if using the animation can be as important as the content of the animation.*

### Using the animation with students

Professionals within education may feel that the animation would be useful for students to watch as part of a broader discussion on mental health. Recent statutory guidance means that health education will be compulsory in all schools from September 2020 and this includes a focus on mental health and wellbeing. The written materials can be used as part of a lesson plan, they were written with this possibility in mind. However, there are some important considerations if the animation is to be used with students.

**Please see the “Guidance for using the animation with students”.**

## The Journey of Recovery

### Animation Overview

The animation is 9 minutes long and is designed to be shown in its entirety. Below is a synopsis of the animation followed by a brief summary of each section. There is a PDF containing guidance and information for the animation.

*Synopsis; The animation starts with young people talking about their reactions to trauma and why these reactions can make everyday life so hard to engage with. There is a specific focus on school and college and what can make these environments particularly difficult to tolerate following trauma.*

*The focus then moves on to the individuality of recovery and the small steps that can make a big difference within the education setting. The young people give their experience of reaching out to find professional, evidence-based help and how this facilitates their recovery, with a final message that recovery is an on-going process and can take a long time.*

#### **Overarching key messages:**

- ***Everyone can be affected by trauma and adversity***
- ***There is no normal reaction to an abnormal event***
- ***Recovery from trauma can take days, weeks, months, years and is not linear***
- ***People can recover from trauma with support from friends, family and school***
- ***Sometimes people can get stuck with their trauma and need professional help in their recovery journey.***

## Animation Sections

The animation has 7 short sections;

<b>Section</b>	<b>Content</b>
<b>1. People experience trauma in many different ways</b>	common reactions to trauma are described. There are five broad areas; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intrusions &amp; nightmares</li> <li>- Thoughts</li> <li>- Emotions</li> <li>- Physical and physiological</li> <li>- Behaviour</li> </ul>
<b>2. Seeing people again can be difficult</b>	these sections begin to highlight how distressing the world can feel in the immediate aftermath of trauma and how difficult everyday life can become.
<b>3. It can feel like no one understands</b>	
<b>4. Things that other people barely notice can feel overwhelming and frightening;</b>	reflections on why schools and colleges can become such difficult environments to tolerate after trauma.
<b>5. Small things can make a huge difference in recovery</b>	young people describe what has helped support them within education and in their everyday lives
<b>6. Help is out there and can take many forms</b>	this touches on the impact of seeking out professional help
<b>7. Recovery can be a long road but worth every step</b>	reflections on what 'recovery' looks like to young people and how their journeys of recovery continue

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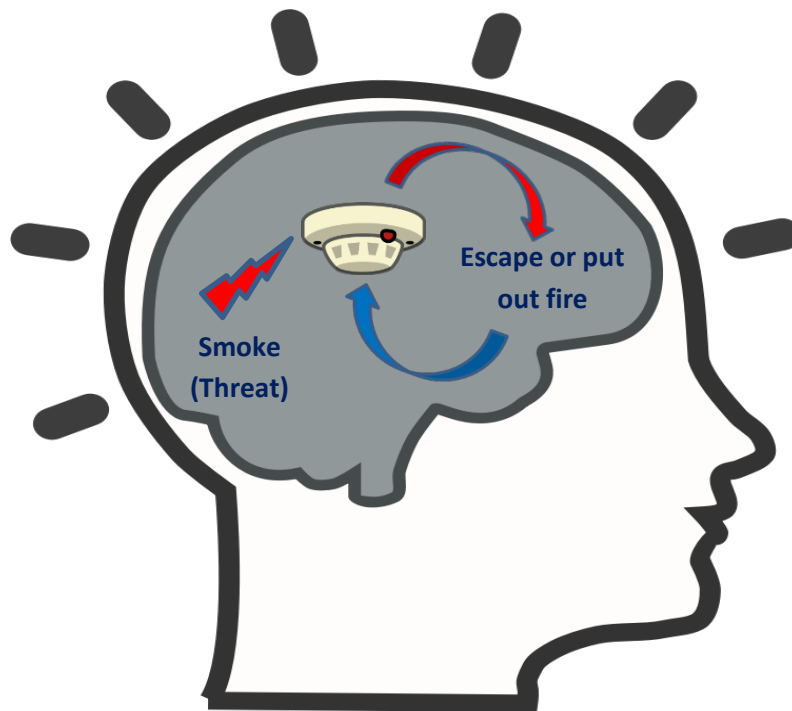
## The Journey of Recovery: section notes and guidance

### 1. People experience trauma in many different ways

There is no 'normal' reaction to an abnormal event and people can have different reactions to trauma at different times. The impact of trauma and some of the common reactions described below can start immediately after a trauma or can arise weeks or months later. Reactions will change over time but can go on for days, weeks, months or even years.

Understanding some basic biology, can help us make sense of common reactions to trauma; when people are exposed to life threatening or life endangering situations the brain and body work hard to get the person to safety. This automatic reaction, triggered by the body's '*threat system*' is fuelled by adrenaline and stress hormones, and is more commonly recognised as the "flight-fright-freeze-submit/flop" responses. These responses are essential for survival.

One way of simplifying the body's very complex threat system is by thinking about it as an internal 'smoke detector'. The brain detects 'threat' (e.g. smoke) and triggers a host of internal reactions that get the body ready to protect itself – either by staying and putting out the fire (*fight*), escaping the fire (*flight*) or sometimes becoming paralysed by the threat (*freeze*). The '*submit/flop*' response is like 'playing dead', which is what some animals do when faced with predators that are threatening to eat them. It is not something that the human body naturally often does in response to 'threat'; it is more of a learnt response.



Following trauma, the body's *threat system* can stay activated and is easily triggered by reminders of the trauma. Reminders can be thoughts, feelings, sights, sounds, smells and body sensations. This can mean that the body is overloaded with waves of adrenaline and stress hormones for periods of time, which can lead to many of the trauma reactions described below.

**Intrusions:** this refers to the memories, thoughts or images (including nightmares) of the traumatic event that can pop in to a person's head. They can be triggered by sight, sound, smell, taste, feelings or just seem to come out of the blue with no trigger. Because of the nature of trauma memories these intrusions come with powerful emotions, often fear, and can make someone feel as if they are actually back in the trauma. This can be a terrifying experience and can lead to 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze' behaviours.

**Cognitive impact:** trauma can affect every day brain functioning and cognitive functioning, which relates to thinking, reasoning, concentration, and also memory. Following trauma people commonly complain that they can no longer think straight, or concentrate and that their thoughts are confused or jump all over the place. This can clearly have implications for someone's capacity to work or study.

Trauma can also change a person's beliefs about the world and themselves. It is common to become worried or preoccupied about 'safety' in the world, and safety of themselves or their loved ones.

People can hold strong beliefs about how they *should* have reacted during a trauma; “*I should have... been braver...been stronger...fought harder...gone back to help etc.*” These can be very distressing beliefs, triggering strong feelings of guilt and shame, which can impact on someone’s journey of recovery.

**Emotional impact:** emotional reactions to trauma can be varied and tend to change over time.

- Numbing, detached and living on ‘autopilot’
- Strong, overwhelming feelings of sadness, fear, anger, disgust *etc.*
- More general change in mood, for example, feeling more irritable, easily frustrated, crying more readily.
- Feeling hopeless

The emotional response and emotional impact of trauma tends to change over time. There are many factors that can influence this and lots of people will start to recover spontaneously with good support from their friends and family, which allows them to continue to live and grow following a trauma.

However, there are times when the emotional impact can be detrimental to someone’s quality of life and have wider implications for their wellbeing and safety. This needs to be assessed appropriately by mental health clinicians to ensure timely interventions and support are offered.

Please see page 11 for information about seeking professional help.

**Physical and physiological impact:** as explained by the biology above, it is likely that people will experience many normal symptoms of anxiety in the days and weeks after a trauma. This can include; racing heart, sweaty palms, feeling tense or jittery, having distorted vision, tight chest, loss of appetite, nausea, shaking & trembling, breathlessness or fast, shallow breathing, feeling dizzy or disoriented, and things not feeling real.

The regular and sudden onset of these symptoms can be terrifying and exhausting to live with and over a prolonged period of time may have wider implications for how someone is feeling; affecting sleep and eating but also impacting on their mood and quality of life.

Depending on the nature of the trauma, there may also be other physical experiences that someone is living with; injuries and pain, tinnitus, mobility problems etc.

**Behavioural impact:** it is understandable given the physical, emotional and cognitive impact described above that people’s behaviour can change following a

trauma. There are many behaviours that you would expect to see as someone tries to cope and adjust to their experience and their behaviour will be dependent on how they feel, what they believe and how old they are.

Some people will feel anxious and unsafe so they may withdraw from the world; avoid seeing friends, going to school, using public transport, attending crowded venues. Others may go out but will feel on edge and distracted and will always be planning an exit strategy, just in case something else happens.

Others may manage their anxiety by constantly checking their world in many ways; via social media, seeking reassurance, repeatedly texting or calling friends and family, locking and checking doors and windows. These behaviours can often be an attempt to feel more in control of the world, which can bring a sense of safety.

The behavioural impact of trauma is complex but usually behaviours can be understood in the context of how a person is responding to the cognitive, emotional and physical impact of the trauma.

## **2. Seeing people again can be difficult & 3. It can feel like no one understands**

Both of these short sections highlight how distressing the world can feel in the immediate aftermath of trauma and how difficult everyday life can become. This suffering is often hidden from view and people will need different things to make the return to everyday life more bearable.

There is no quick-fix, but it is important for young people returning to school to feel that the adults around them understand that they *might* be struggling and what they might be struggling with. The only way to do this is to ask young people and to try to make individual plans to support them.

Some ideas about providing a rapid response to students are listed below; clearly this is not an exhaustive list and will need to be adapted depending on how many students may have been affected and what the school's capacity is;

- Outreach by text or phone to parents from senior leadership to enquire about impact on their child
- If an incident has happened locally, reaching out to all students asking them if they have been affected and if they have a point of contact within school
- Return to school meeting between trusted adult and senior leadership at school and each affected pupil to make support plans
- If a number of students are affected by the same trauma then it can be helpful to bring them together to let them know what the school will do to support them and how they can seek out support
- Provide a method of regularly checking in with affected students; is there a trusted adult they can come to? Is there a safe space they can go to?

Perhaps the most important element of early support within schools is early communication with students, helping them to feel safe and offering them some choice about how to manage themselves within the school environment.



#### **4. Things that other people barely notice can feel overwhelming & frightening**

This section highlights why schools and colleges can become such difficult environments for young people to tolerate after trauma. These reactions are often caused by the sensitivity to the body's flight-fright-freeze system following trauma. The result is that people can become hyper-alert to possible 'threats' or preoccupied about further threats.

Triggers at school may vary depending on the trauma someone has experienced but common ones include; unexpected loud noise, screaming, bangs, crowds, alarms, smells, particular people in school or specific places within school.

Students who have experienced trauma will often be more aware of and more sensitive to stories in the media reporting other traumatic events. This can be distressing for students and may exacerbate their own trauma response.

Suggestions about support and interventions are covered in the section below.

#### **5. Small things can make a huge difference in recovery**

A key intervention for young people who have experienced trauma is to make their school environment feel as safe and predictable as realistically possible. This helps to dampen down a person's 'threat system' by making life more predictable and giving people some choice in how to manage their day.

Below are some areas to consider;

##### People/personnel:

- Which staff need to know the young person is struggling?
- Is there a trusted adult that the pupil has identified they would go to when in need?
- If a pupil doesn't want to talk, is there another way they can communicate with someone at school; texting, writing, email?
- If there is a change in staff, who will tell them enough information so any plans are still put into practice for this pupil?

Key transitions during the day: registration, movement between classes, break-times, lunch-time, and end of day, are all times of increased noise, activity and unpredictability. Therefore these are likely to be the most triggering times for students. Any intervention that allows increased choice and predictability around these times will likely help students

- Does the pupil have somewhere safe they can go to in times of need?
- Is there a way of timing some transitions so the pupil leaves earlier/later than others?
- Can students come in earlier to school?
- Where can they sit in assembly that feels tolerable?

#### Curriculum & timetable

- Give warnings prior to lessons if trigger topics may be covered and give choice about participation
- School trips/events; create safe plans and consider what feels too much too soon
- Are there some lessons that are more challenging – cognitive capacity and memory may be affected and learning will be harder
- Are exams manageable? Do they need to happen in a smaller room? With more time?

#### Emergency planning

- Make safety plans around fire alarm procedures or lock downs
- Give warnings of fire alarms and lock downs
- Orientate students to emergency procedures under non-emergency conditions

The key to any plan is making it in collaboration with the young people so it fits with their needs and is realistic within the school environment.

## **6. Help is out there and can take many forms**

Just as people's reactions to traumatic events are different, so is their recovery. Often people will find their own ways to navigate life and recover after trauma, and they will gradually regain a quality of life without any professional help. However, it is important to recognise that recovery is rarely a neat, linear journey; there will be periods of plateau and setbacks.

### Signs and symptoms that further support is needed

It is recognised that recovery from trauma is not a linear process and it would be expected that people will have an increase in trauma symptoms and distress around reminders and anniversaries. However, more persistent changes in behaviour and mood can be cause for concern. For example;

- Heightened startle response – appearing jumpy and on edge
- Increased agitation or anger
- Sustained social withdrawal
- Avoidance of people, places and subjects that does not appear to subside
- Increased avoidance across the school environment
- School refusal

### Seeking professional help

Change and recovery can be extremely challenging and there are times when people can become stuck and need professional help. There are good evidence-based treatments that can help people recover from trauma, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR). These are typically provided by NHS CAMHS services. GPs and school health advisors will know the referral routes.

It is also important to recognise the impact of trauma on the whole family – sharing concerns with the family and encouraging the family to get the GP involved can be a good starting point.

## **7. Recovery can be a long road but worth every step**

Having consistent and available trusted relationships (adults and friends) is a fundamental basis for recovery and the stability and safety that professionals within education can offer traumatised young people can play a huge part of this.

No one's journey of recovery is linear and schools can also play a part in recognising when there may be set backs to someone's recovery, such as anniversaries or further traumas, and can adjust their support accordingly.

### Other aspects of recovery and support to consider;

- Be aware of traumatic incidents being reported in the media, especially if they are close to 'home' - check in with students in the immediate days following these stories to see how they are doing and whether extra support is required.
- Media coverage during related court cases or inquests can significantly add to distress and anxiety at an already difficult time. Being aware of what details are available to the public may help schools to identify when students need further support.
- Anniversaries and significant dates can create heightened distress in the preceding days and weeks and also for some time afterwards. Where possible it is important for schools to be aware of significant dates and make plans to support individual students over this period.

Whole school response to anniversaries; there may be some traumatic incidents when it feels important and appropriate that the whole school come together to commemorate. This kind of response needs time and thought and co-production with students, staff and sometimes parents to set the right tone.

- Build commemorations around a school's key values and strengths e.g music, creativity, religious faith, poetry, drama, spoken word
- Allow students choice in what they do or don't want to contribute
- Balance between commemoration and celebration
- Create a memorial e.g. bench, garden, plaque, water feature, path, mural

## **Looking after yourself**

How people take care of themselves both physically and emotionally in the weeks and months following a trauma can have a big impact on recovery. This can take a lot of effort when people may be feeling numb or when there are high levels of distress and anxiety.

It is important to look after yourself if you are supporting a friend or family member who has been through trauma as this can be really hard work.

There are some key areas to consider;

**Check-in with yourself:** take the time to stop and notice how you are actually feeling. Notice the emotions you have and what your body feels like. This will give you some clues as to what you might need to look after yourself.

### **Basic needs:**

- Eat well
- Develop good sleeping habits
- Take regular exercise
- Continue to do things that give you enjoyment, even if that feels hard
- Stay connected with important people in your life
- Be kind to yourself
- Take a break from social media

**Managing strong emotions:** sometimes waves of strong feelings can be overwhelming so it can be helpful to have some ideas how to manage these. Using the 5 senses can be a helpful way of changing how the body is feeling and moving thoughts and feelings in a different direction. Below are some examples but see if you can come up with your own ideas that will work for you:

### **Smell:**

- Carry around perfume samples
- Light a candle
- Use your favourite body spray/aftershave, shower gel, hand cream etc
- Have a diffuser in your room

### **Sight:**

- Put pictures, photos or quotes up in your room that remind you of a better feeling, where possible put these on your phone to carry with you
- Have calming light in your room (e.g. fairy lights/lava lamp)
- Watch something that you enjoy

### **Sound:**

- Have a playlist of music that will lift your mood
- Listen to an audio book
- Talk to a friend or adult that you find comforting or reassuring
- Use an app that helps you feel calmer

**Taste:**

- Carry strong flavoured sweets like extra strong mints, sour or liquorice – even if you don't like them, the strong flavour can distract you and allow you to refocus – even better if you do like them!
- Make a calming drink
- Plan a good meal to make

**Touch:**

- Have a bath or shower
- Wear soft and comfy clothes
- Carry something with you that helps you feel calm