

# Dialogue- COVID-19

Talking with trauma-experienced  
young people to support them in  
returning to previously normal  
routines and activities

‘The new normal’

What this may look like and how to support  
children and young people moving forward

## As stated previously by Christine

- Coronavirus is likely to be with us for a long time and is likely to become endemic in the population with the potential roll out of an annual vaccination programme
- We recognise that a generation of children and young people will continue to feel its impact in some way; we may continue to wear masks, use hand sanitizers in shops and restaurants. We may even have short periods of regional/local lockdowns during the winter months.

# So what next?

If children and young people have access to clear and honest explanations of what is happening and may happen in the future, and they know it's okay to talk about the pandemic and its consequences, no matter how worrying, then it can give them the confidence to reach out to you.

All children, even teenagers (particularly the young people we work with) want to know that they can be kept safe.

For many of us, the gradual easing of lockdown brings a longed-for opportunity (even if at a social distance) – to see friends, play sports and resume contact with family in 'real space'

However for some, even the happy, much anticipated changes and re-adjustment can be difficult for our mental health.

And for many others the prospect of coming out of lockdown when debate is still live about the different variants of COVID-19 can be scary. This may especially apply to those more vulnerable with mental health concerns and/or those who have experienced trauma.

## Potential emotional response to coronavirus or other traumatic events

- It's normal to experience traumatic stress following a disturbing event, whether it's a traffic accident, plane crash, violent crime, terrorist attack, global pandemic, or a natural disaster such as COVID. Both adults and children may feel intense shock, confusion, and fear, or feel numb or overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, sometimes all at once.
- These emotions aren't limited to the people who had first hand experienced. Round-the-clock news and social media coverage means we can all be bombarded with images of tragedy, suffering, and loss almost the instant they occur anywhere in the world. Repeated exposure can overwhelm the nervous system and create traumatic stress
- Traumatic stress can effect your sense of security, leaving you feeling helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world
- You may feel physically and emotionally drained, overcome with grief, or find it difficult to focus, sleep, or control your temper. These are all normal responses to abnormal events.
- Often, the unsettling thoughts and feelings of traumatic stress—as well as any unpleasant physical symptoms—start to fade as life gradually returns to normal over the days or weeks following a the end of the event or crisis. But there's also a lot you can do to assist in your recovery and better come to terms with the trauma you've experienced.

# Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress

## **Emotional and physical symptoms of traumatic stress include but are not limited to :**

- Shock and disbelief. You have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened, or feel numb and disconnected from your feelings.
- Fear. You worry that the same thing will happen again, or that you'll lose control or break down.
- Sadness or grief, especially if people you know died or suffered life-altering consequences.
- Helplessness. The sudden, unpredictable nature of violent crime, accidents, pandemics, or natural disasters can leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless, and even trigger anxiety or depression.
- Guilt that you survived when others died, or feeling that you could have done more to help.
- Anger. You may be angry at God, governments, or others you feel are responsible, or be prone to emotional outbursts.
- Shame, especially over feelings or fears that you can't control.

## Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress

- **Feeling dizzy or faint**, stomach tightening or churning, excessive sweating.
- **Trembling, shaking**, experiencing cold sweats, having a lump in your throat, or feeling choked up.
- **Rapid breathing**, pounding heart, even chest pains or difficulty breathing.
- **Racing thoughts**, being unable to rest or stop pacing. You may also have difficulty concentrating, memory problems, or confusion.
- **Changes in your sleeping patterns**. You experience insomnia or nightmares, for example.
- **Unexplained aches and pains**, including headaches, changes in sexual function.
- **Loss or increase in appetite**, or excessive consumption of alcohol, nicotine, or drugs.

## Some interesting facts and data from a Young Minds Survey

In Young Minds most recent survey - Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs conducted in February 2021 they presented the following statistics:

The survey carried out with 2,438 young people aged 13-25, between 26<sup>th</sup> January and 12<sup>th</sup> February 2021 shows:

- **75% of respondents agreed that they have found the current lockdown harder to cope with than the previous ones** including 44% who said it was much harder. (14% said it was easier, 11% said it was the same)
- **67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.** This includes young people who had been bereaved or undergone traumatic experiences during the pandemic, who were concerned about whether friendships would recover, or who were worried about the loss of education or their prospects of finding work. (19% neither agreed nor disagreed, 14% disagreed)
- **79% of respondents agreed that their mental health would start to improve when most restrictions were lifted,** but some expressed caution about restrictions being lifted too quickly and the prospect of future lockdowns.

## Some interesting facts and data from a Young Minds Survey

Respondents were also asked '*what mental health support would be most useful to them at the moment*'. **The most effective help would be face-to-face therapeutic or emotional support**, followed by:

- **online and digital support** in any format
- **self-help techniques and coping strategies** (e.g. learning calming techniques),
- general information, guidance and advice (e.g. practical information about COVID-19 and mental health-specific advice)
- **advice on how to help others** and the importance of friends and family (e.g. one of the respondents said 'helping others might help me feel more fulfilled and purposeful.')

Most of the respondents were willing to share advice and solidarity with others in similar situations – this suggest that allowing young people to support each other is going to be very helpful.

As you are aware Trauma Experienced young people may already :

- Find change difficult
- Find it difficult to regulate their emotions
- Have limited language for expressing their feeling.
- Internalise feelings
- Exhibit signs of anxiety
- Exhibit signs of anger and aggression

Consequently the fact that many of the young people you support will be suffering from some or all of the aforementioned means that supporting them to move back into community living/engagement maybe hard.

It is important therefore to have a plan.

What needs to be considered? What might the plan look like?

Have open honest calm conversation with your young people – some of you might be PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy trained,

- What changes have your young people been through?
- What has adversely effected them the most?
- Were there any positives that should remain in place?
- What are their fears & hopes moving forward?

Ask them to reflect on these questions, develop a plan together based on their answers.

Ensure all stake holders (who are they?) are aware of the plan and will help support it.

# Example Plan

This is an interactive section with break out rooms – please come back with some points of discussion for your plan ideas/examples (there are no right or wrongs)

# Example

What X felt during lockdown:

- X found it hard not seeing his family and friends
- X struggled with wearing masks as his glasses always misted up
- X missed playing football but is worried about playing again due to physical contact
- X really enjoyed learning from home – he felt more supported, he was not always getting into trouble he was not picked on for being in care
- X finds it hard to sleep and complains of feeling achy all the time

# Example

## What can we do to help

- X found it hard not seeing his family and friends – ensure visits are booked as soon as the roadmap allows but do not overwhelm with too many in one go
- X struggled with wearing masks as his glasses always misted up – while all shops are now open ensure that while masks are still required in the shops X has a good quality breathable mask and anti-fog spray or wipes
- X missed playing football but is worried about playing again due to physical contact – outside sports are now permitted again take time to show X the football club covid policy and research on why it is now thought it is extremely rare to catch covid outside
- X really enjoyed learning from home – he felt more supported, he was not always getting into trouble he was not picked on for being in care – liaise closely with the school and other stakeholders to come up with a strategy that works for X. Where possible gather evidence to highlight why a mixture of home and school learning may benefit X moving forward
- X finds it hard to sleep and complains of feeling achy all the time – explain that stress can have physical symptoms, explore some techniques to aid sleep: lavender pillow, no screen rule 1 hour before bed etc. Suggest talking to others who feel the same explore support options together to find one that best suits the young person.

# Useful sites for advice and information

<https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/student-trauma-and-wellbeing-post-lockdown-mental-health-coronavirus-pastoral-schools/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-highlights-importance-talking-children-about-coronavirus>

<https://www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/guidance-advice/talking-to-children-about-coronavirus/>

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-highlights-importance-talking-children-about-coronavirus>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/publications/talking-your-children-about-coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm>

<https://ddpnetwork.org>