

# Advice for parents and carers

What you can do to help.

There are many things that a parent or carer can do to help and support a child or teenager who has experienced trauma. The input and involvement of a loving parent or carer can be a vital part of a child or teenager’s recovery. It is also important to remember that resilience and recovery from Traumatic Stress is common.

Siblings, extended Families and Communities.

Sibling relationships, extended family and community relationships are important. Maintaining family and community links is healing and serve as a buffer at times of stress. Cultural, ethnic, religious or spiritual connections and traditions are important - they promote a sense of stability and can be nurturing for children and young people, families and communities.

The impact of Trauma on Families.

Traumatic experiences can affect individuals within families, they can affect relationships between family members and also whole family functioning. It is important to be aware of any impact that a child's responses to traumatic stress has on a parent or caregiver.

In order to be able to attend to a child's needs, parents and carers need to tend to their own self-care as an ‘unregulated’ parent or carer cannot provide the support that a traumatised child or young person needs.

## The four ‘R’s’



Recognition



Reassurance



Routine



Regulation



It is important for Parents and caregivers to be able to recognise the common reactions to trauma in children and young people. Helpful and healing responses include offering reassurance, establishing routines and helping a young person to ‘regulate’.

## What you can do to help - The four ‘R’s’ - Recognition, Reassurance, Routine and Regulation.

### 1 Recognition

It is important to be able to recognise how trauma can affect children and young people.

- Disrupted Sleep and nightmares
- Thinking about the traumatic event all the time
- Avoiding people, places, activities, smells, objects or any reminders of the trauma
- Feeling scared and ‘on guard’
- Reminders of the trauma may be ‘triggering’ and cause distress
- Unable to concentrate in School or not wanting to go to school
- Feeling a mixture of emotions including anger, sadness, shame or guilt
- Experiencing physical symptoms like headaches or sore stomachs
- Re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks or nightmares as if it is still happening
- Behaving in a more clingy way
- Being more irritable
- Saying negative things about themselves
- Behaving like a younger child like not wanting to sleep alone or bed wetting
- Loss of former independence
- Reckless or impulsive behaviours
- Expressing suicidal thoughts or self-harming

### 2 Reassurance

There are many things you can do to help a Child or Young Person.

- **Be available and Listen.** Provide the space, gentle encouragement and patience to children and young people to talk or communicate through art or play. Validate thoughts and feelings by ‘tuning in’.
- **Offer calm reassurance.** This can be simple like ‘I am here for you, you can talk to me any time, you are safe’. Remind them of all the people who care about them. This promotes a sense of safety and security. Younger children may need extra cuddles, older children may need to spend extra time as a family together.
- **Correct any misinformation about the traumatic event.** This should be delivered in simple language which is appropriate for your child or young person’s age and understanding.
- **Limit exposure to traumatic reminders on the media.**
- **Be especially loving and supportive.** Let your child or young person know that you ‘hold them in mind’ and are there for them – even when you are not together.
- **Speak to your Child’s Teacher** and other involved professionals if you have any concerns so they can provide your child with the appropriate support.

### 3 Routines

- **Maintain routines.** Continue with routines around mealtimes, sleep, homework, household chores and caring for family pets. Eat together as a family if possible.
- **Eat well.** Try and eat a healthy balanced diet.
- Establish good sleep routines. Encourage daytime exercise, eat at regular mealtimes, encourage relaxing activities to ‘wind down’ throughout the evening, avoiding caffeine containing or energy drinks, avoid screen time in the evening and eating late at night.
- **Help your child or young person connect with friends.** Being connected is protective and builds resilience. Belonging to a community or group with a shared purpose eg school orchestra, football team or youth group promotes self confidence.
- **Allow time for fun.**

### 4 Regulate

Help your child calm their stress response.

When highly stressed, ‘grounding’ strategies can be effective at helping to bring children and young people back to the ‘here and now’. By returning to the real world, stress is thereby quickly reduced. Here are some examples.

- **Rhythmic, repetitive activities** are calming and help children who are feeling highly anxious and distressed to feeling calmer. Running, walking, skipping, drumming, trampolining, dancing, throwing a ball, singing, colouring, building or doing art projects can all help.
- **The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise** – encourage your child to notice and say out loud
  - **5 things that they can see.**
  - **4 things that they can feel.**
  - **3 things that they can hear.**
  - **2 things that they can smell**
  - **1 positive thing about themselves.**
- **Other activities.** For younger children blow bubbles and notice their shape and colour. Use Mindful colouring books noticing both colours and design.
- **Learning to relax by mindful meditation.** Sit in a relaxed and comfortable position then focus on your breathing as you breath in and out. If your mind wanders bring your attention gently back to your breath.
- **Belly breathing.** Parent and child can do this together – matching each other’s breathing patterns. Put one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest saying ‘copy me’. Slowly breathe in from your stomach (imagine it expanding like a balloon) and slowly breathe out (as the balloon deflates).
- **Use positive self talk and model realistic hopeful thinking.** Encourage your child to use positive self talk such as ‘I am strong and I am loved’.
- **Reach out and Connect.** Feeling emotionally connected and supported are effective buffers and protective when we experience stress.
- **Support children and young people to problem solve and self soothe.** Listen carefully to any ideas from children and young people. This could be as simple as drawing a picture for a favourite teacher or taking the dog for a walk. This helps develop self-esteem and gives a greater sense of control and choice to a child or young person.
- **Taking care of yourself.** In order to be able to attend to a child’s needs, parents and carers need to tend to their own self-care as an ‘unregulated’ parent or carer cannot provide the support that a traumatised child or young person needs. This includes physical, emotional and spiritual health needs. Connect with friends, family and the wider community and practice self regulation skills like breathing and distraction. Sometimes it is helpful to access extra support for example via the General Practitioner, Children’s services, Adult mental health services, Support groups and Charity organisations.
- **Know when to seek a referral** and how to seek a referral for your child or young person. [SEE MORE](#)