

# Responding to Acute Trauma



# Introduction

The following document describes 9 stages that we believe most people will go through as part of a response to acute trauma. In each stage we have provided some insight, a clarification of risks, recommended activities and tips for both parents and teachers. We have also explored how each stage will be influenced by COVID-19.

With regards to timings and expectations, we believe stages 1-5 usually take place over a period of 6 months to 2 years based on each individual and stages 6 - 9 can take place anywhere between 6 months but most people tend to take a few months to work through each of the later stages.

## General things to bear in mind:

Our response to trauma is holistic - we will be physically and mentally affected and we may display behaviours that we haven't previously. Our thoughts and feelings may feel unusual - and they may even be unhealthy. Our children may not be those we know, love and recognise - they may be behaving out of character - and that, at least initially is OK.

Responding to trauma will be incredibly hard (and traumatic) for parents and teachers - and we should create a safety plan for your own well being. You should try to put your own support network in place - a friend who you can rely on, a support group other parents in the same situation, an understanding of what you can do when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

## Specific things that we need to be aware of and look out for include:

PTSD is often referenced in relation to an entire traumatic event (the loss of a friend or an accident etc). However is often based on a specific 'flashbulb moment' and that moment can be in any of the days that follow a traumatic event. We need to really listen and take notice of what our children are saying and what they are focused on so that we can understand the specific points of their trauma.

As a result of a traumatic event (particularly in childhood), we can develop what is referred to as 'magical thinking'. This is when we believe we have some form of control or influence over the world, life/death and what happens. We may believe people can see our thoughts or influence things in our life. The challenge with magical thinking is that much of our terminology around death can fuel a magical thinking mindset. We often hear people saying things like, 'it's just goodbye until we meet again', 'they are with you, they are looking down on you'. We are often told that our lost friends will be proud of us and for someone that is experiencing even low level magical thinking then this can enhance it.





Children and young people may begin to show very impulsive thinking, short term decision making and a need for instant gratification. It is useful to continually remind children of the consequences of any decisions or actions particularly those around their finances, education and their consumption of drugs and alcohol.

You may notice that children tell lies - some of which can be very complex, distressing and shocking. Children and young people may seem to be invested in the stories they are sharing, like they believe them completely and experience the wide range of emotions that would accompany them. It is useful to be mindful of the fact when we are experiencing feelings we don't understand or thoughts that we don't recognise, it can, sometimes, be easy to create a story that explains our feelings rather than find a way to justify feelings we can't explain. This is a behaviour that might become more prevalent as time passes and there becomes less focus on the acute trauma and less support available to children that have been effected by the incident.

Children are the experts of their own trauma. Our children will have grown-up, exposed to things that even adults will struggle to process. Although we will naturally want to protect our children, we must also respect their experiences and continue to treat them with honesty and allow them to have any information they request.

We should give children the opportunity to ask questions and respect them with honest, direct but well considered answers. Children may have incredibly low self-esteem and may well be traumatised by loud noises, sudden changes and signs of anger so despite the huge challenges we will be facing, it is really important that we remain calm, compassionate and in control of our emotions when we are with our children.

**To access more support from Phoenix Education Consultancy, seek more information or arrange further training or mentoring, please visit [www.phoenixeducationconsultancy.com](http://www.phoenixeducationconsultancy.com) or email [info@phoenixeducationconsultancy.com](mailto:info@phoenixeducationconsultancy.com)**

**PAPYRUS**  
**Suicide Prevention Charity**  
**[www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)**  
**0800 068 41 41**

**YOUNG MINDS**  
**[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)**

**KOOTH**  
**online mental health**  
**community**  
**[www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)**

**SAMARITANS**  
**[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**  
**116 123**



# Stage 1: Rejection

## Insights

(things you might feel or notice)

**Disengagement:** It will feel like the world has really stopped and you will probably find it incredible that the world is still spinning. You may find it difficult to believe that the world will still focus on COVID-19, that the days will tick past and that many people will be living their 'normal' lives when your life has changed forever. It will be harder to accept this as people will know what has happened - people will have had the opportunity to learn about what has happened because of the news - these people will know your friend has died and still be able to get up, go to work, focus on vaccines or restrictions etc. You may feel angry, you may feel disbelief. You may just feel really, incredibly alone as it will seem that no one knows how you feel or recognise the significance of your emotions.

**Unable to grasp thoughts:** You may find that you feel forgetful, that you get your words the wrong way round, get lost half way through a sentence. You may find that you speak and move slowly. Your brain may feel hazy, foggy - you may be unable to think about what life felt like before, you may even be unable to remember what was happening, what felt important and the things that you were doing, learning or talking about with your friends.

**Emptiness:** Some people think that feeling empty means feeling nothing but actually feeling empty means feeling a huge, significant hole - like something has been torn out, like something is missing, like you have to function when you are no longer whole. Emptiness is a very difficult emotion to deal with but the 'hole' of emptiness can demand lots and lots of attention and create lots of uncomfortable or unrecognised feelings.

**Physical symptoms:** sleep, changes in appetite, headaches, sickness, constipation

## Rejection Risks

(behaviours to monitor in this stage)

In this initial stage of the trauma response, children and young people may begin to use drugs and alcohol in order to cope with their emotions. In the immediate wake of traumatic incident, it can be easy to bend the rules and make allowances for the use of alcohol, and in some instances recreational drugs, but this sets precedent for future dependency and abuse. In this stage you may also see the emergence of reckless thinking and behaviours and it is important that these are monitored, even if they aren't violent, disruptive or illegal.

At this stage, children and young people can also refuse to accept what has happened and you can find them to be avoidant, despondent or otherwise totally disengaged from any response to the trauma. This severe rejection can lead to magical thinking and complex post traumatic stress disorder.

*'I knew everyone said he was dead. I knew that - and maybe everyone else believed it. But that was up to them - they obviously didn't know him or love him like I did. I wasn't going to give up on him. I knew I would find wherever the paramedics took him and I knew he would still be alive. I wasn't even that sad at his funeral because I knew it wasn't actually the end'*

## Teacher Advice

- Maintain routines (timetables, core rules like uniform etc)
- Minimise expectation of achievement and or any form of stress
- Create safe spaces
- Provide 'have to go' code that allows pupils to easily leave learning environments and get to safe space
- Increase communication with parents particularly around: travel to and from school, any signs of risk behaviours

## Parent Advice

- Make sure there is a place where child feels safe - this might involve changing/spring cleaning rooms or a quiet space
- Consider a weighted blanket
- Stock up on bland food, easy to grab food and be flexible with meal times, diet etc
- Try and have one 'normalising' or grounding activity daily - watching a film together, eating dinner at the table, going for a walk etc.
- Make communication open at all times (night times are long and lonely - be the parent that leaves the bedroom door open in case your children need you)
- Show your own vulnerabilities (you may not have the answers and you have to solve these difficulties- just show you sad that they are hurting and hope to make it better)
- Clearly communicate any plans/expectations/news - direct communication is essential - funeral, inquest, criminal inquiry - how things will happen, what will happen next etc.

## What to do

- Support yourself with the basics: colouring, crafting, doodling, meditation, gentle exercise, reading your favourite book, watching films or TV (but not the news)
- Stay in touch with people that you feel comfortable around - maybe your friends from school - make a 'safe' list of people that you want to speak to, away from social media and focus your attention there for the short term. (It can be useful to stay away from social media and you could temporarily block anyone who you think might make you feel uncomfortable.
- Avoid going to newsagents, petrol stations or supermarkets (anywhere that you will see people buying newspapers, stay away from social media and avoid googling anything to do with your friend or school).
- Stay away from anything that can create extreme emotion - very scary films, very loud noises, fast car rides etc.

## Pandemic Influence

- It can be much harder to take care of ourselves because of COVID-19 restrictions; our usual activities and our support will be minimised because of lockdown so think about how we can safely prompt self-care within those restrictions
- Find safe ways of maintaining contact with the people we find supportive
- Our emotions are already likely to be heightened because of the pandemic - we may already be living in flight or fight and it is important that we recognise the impact of increased stress/anxiety/fear - we should check in on suicidal ideation, measure of hope and optimism for the future and respond to ANY changes in behaviour (even sudden improvements or sense of control as this can often indicate a decision to end life).



# Stage 2: Consume

## Insights

### (things you might feel or notice)

**Violated:** Those that have spoken to us about their feelings of surviving through trauma express the horror when the world becomes aware of really personal, private and sensitive information without their consent or consideration. They describe the lack of control as being really difficult to deal with and the ambition for people to get a 'good story' rather than consider personal boundaries, emotions or respect is especially hurtful. They describe feeling exposed, vulnerable and that people are taking advantage of the terrible things that have happened. The media provides a double-edged sword because even though you don't want everyone knowing this personal, sensitive information - and that it feels unfair that everyone becomes part of your pain, hurt and upset, it is also hard seeing people react to the news.

**Anger:** It's natural to feel really angry. It's often a response to the lack of control you have - over this happening to you, it impacts you and now it is being shared with the world on the terms of a journalist rather than you as an individual. You may find that you are angry at specific individuals - strangers, news reporters, people that are close to you but don't understand you. You might suddenly feel irritated by your friends who aren't responding as you had hoped or saying the things you need to hear. You might feel angry at life, for being so cruel. You might feel angry at yourself for not doing things differently. You might feel angry because all of a sudden you have to be an adult. Because you have been forced to learn lots of adult things. You might feel angry because life seemed so simple and you never realised it was going to be this hard.

**Isolation:** You may have lots of people talking about you. You may be surrounded by people that are trying to do nice things for you, support you, keep you occupied but you are probably going to feel really alone. You will probably feel that although people are offering to help, no one really wants to hear about what's happening. You may feel that people only want to hear you are 'OK' rather than hearing your true thoughts and feelings. You may feel like people are trying to offer solutions and force you to do things that will make you feel better when you don't feel like you are done being sad. It's really hard to be friends with people that aren't thinking about things in the same way as you and although it's important to remember that your friends care about you and will be doing their best to support you, it can be really hard to relate to them and continue your relationship as it previously was when something so significant and life changing has happened to you. Even when you and your friends have been through the same thing; even when you have all lost a member of your community or someone you cared about, our individual responses are so significantly different that you can easily feel that no one in the world knows how you are feeling or understands what you need.



## Media Risk

**PTSD** - PTSD can be caused by very specific moments that surround a traumatic event. Seeing a news headline or hearing a news report can easily recreate these moments as can witnessing the ways in which other people respond to them.

**Disassociation** - It's really easy to disassociate with your real life when it's all over the media. There are lots of traumatic events that happen every day and, in order to protect our well being, we disassociate from that. When we find our own lives in the media, it's very easy to do the same.

**Bargaining** - If there are signs of magical thinking in the shock stage, it is likely that you can expect to see bargaining as events are shared in the news. We are used to analysing the news, criticising fake news or finding that things have been sensationalised by the press. The experience of being in the media, particularly when reporting hasn't been compassionate and considerate, can lead to us following the same process but within our own lives.

## What to do

- Write a letter to a journalist
- Create your own news stories - share your memories, your feelings, poems, artwork etc
- Make media rules and share them with the people that you spend time with or whom are likely to contact you
- Have a temporary number to limit the amount of people that can contact you with questions or information

## Pandemic Influence

- It will be incredibly difficult to know that COVID-19 continues to steal media headlines when something so tragic and personally significant happens - this may fuel anger and cause people to flout rules and restrictions in response.
- The huge attention and focus given to COVID-19 will give a sense of this event not being important. It will be minimised. It will be like the world is saying, 'this doesn't matter that much' and that will be very difficult for children to understand and accept. It can be beneficial to explain why COVID-19 will consume the media at the moment and why this will change the focus given to other tragedies.

*"I remember watching people pick up the paper in Tesco - my best friend was on the front page and the accident that had killed him was the headline image next to it. People picked up the paper and tossed it into their basket with a quick glance at the crash I had been in the day before. I stood for what felt like forever waiting for someone to show some form of emotion as they looked at what to me, was the worst news in the world. I expected someone to fall to their knees, scream their head off - anything - but there was nothing and at that point I felt like the whole world knew my pain, had the choice to share it but didn't care at all"*

## Parent Advice

- If this is unavoidable, make sure that you work with the media on your own terms - for example, if they are going to be at a funeral, tell the media when to arrive, give them a statement, let them take some pictures and then get them to leave. Make sure you offer similar practice if you are holding a private remembrance event.
- Ask your children if they want to see what is happening in the news or not. If they do make sure they have a safe and secure environment to do so. Give them the opportunity to ask questions, share their feelings and process things that are being said in the news.
- Despite our natural wish to protect children, it is important to respect the magnitude of what they have experienced and be open and honest with them about all related details of information rather than trying to shield them - this can lead to conflict, frustration and confusion.
- If children do not want to see or engage with media, you will need to respect this as a household and ensure anyone that engages with your children adheres to the same rules.
- If your child has a mobile phone, it would be useful to review it regularly - maybe even given them a temporary number so that only specific people can get in touch with them.

## Teacher Advice

- Where possible encourage children to avoid the media (definitely without the ability to have one to one support and interaction whilst viewing the news) If you do look at the media, make sure you are in a safe environment and give children the opportunity to question and respond.
- Some children may want to make a scrapbook, to keep the newspapers etc but it is important that you ask who wants to do this and who would rather not - it should not be a whole class activity.
- Make sure children have the opportunity to voice their concerns or questions, to share their opinions, fears or questions with journalists or otherwise - writing letters (whether they are sent or not) can be hugely beneficial in helping children realise they have a voice
- Ensure children have the opportunity to create their own narrative - what is the story they would like to share? Can the class make their own newspaper full of their own memories, feelings etc.







# Stage 3: Spread

## Insights

### (things you might feel or notice)

**Overwhelmed:** When people share information that you feel is part of you, your life or your business online, it can feel entirely invasive and overwhelming. Other people sharing their opinions, gossiping, or even showing kindness, compassion and sympathy when they aren't people you know or have anything to do with you can feel incredibly uncomfortable. Seeing something online for just a minute, can lead to it playing over on your mind for hours - days, weeks or longer. It can make your head feel more foggy, unclear and overloaded.

**Dependent:** Using social media when you are responding to trauma can become a really unhealthy and dangerous dependency. When you are processing a traumatic event and all of the emotions that are associated with that, you may feel that you begin to feel dependent on social media. You may want to continually feel connected to what has happened, you may find being surrounded by others who are speaking about the incident, remembering and honouring your friend can make you feel consumed but may also create a sense of comfort. It prevents you from having to address other things in life, to prioritise above and beyond your immediate grief and help you feel less alone. A dependency on social media is likely to only have negative outcomes.

**Destructive:** It is important to remember that when people are using social media, they rarely think about who will receive their messages and who may see them as they spread through social media. People, as we discussed in the previous section, will disassociate with the news and are likely to make unthoughtful and unkind comments. It is a natural, normal but largely unhealthy response to engage with these comments - even if you are trying to defend your friend, encourage kindness or share your own emotions so that others can be more thoughtful, these activities are unlikely to ever end well.

**Attention-Seeking:** Of course, in these circumstances, you have every right to seek attention. We aren't using these words with a negative connotation. You are entitled to have attention and support but social media might not be the place to achieve this in a safe and supportive manner. Sharing personal information, feelings, news links or pictures, for attention, comment, sympathy etc can lead to negative habits and can really make you feel more alone in the long term. Consider how you can share your emotions and feelings with people that can more effectively and consistently support them.

*'I still remember walking along the corridor to English and one boy, in front of me said to his friend, 'yeah! I saw it! I heard his head was on the other side of the road, too' His friend gave him a thud in the arm and hissed 'she's behind us'. I still remember walking behind them - not shocked they were gossiping, not even sad that I felt totally alone but instead wondering if people would have been more upset if his head had been on the other side of the road. I wondered if that's what had been needed to people to seem bothered.'*

## Risks for Social Media

**Suitable Online Behaviours:** Children often need to be provided with some rules and guidelines for appropriate online behaviour. There is a risk that children may not be able to stay safe online and can be victims of bullying or abuse. There is also the risk of behaviours online that can negatively affect self-esteem and lead to a cycle of 'posting and like seeking' for a source of confidence and self worth. When a child is vulnerable, all these risks are significantly amplified.

**Trauma Consumption:** Social media provides a space in which children can surround themselves with news, details, comments about the event. They can immerse themselves in the trauma without the pressure to process their emotions or respond to other aspects of their lives. Although this can happen easily and can be comforting, it is incredibly damaging and can easily lead to secondary PTSD.

## Pandemic Impact

- Many of us (adults and children) are spending lots more time on devices as a result of lockdown. If you are restricting social media, you should do it as a family so that you are available and focused on your children.
- We have lots more time on our hands so it is important that we think of 'safe' activities that can be used to pass time in a way that allows for relaxation, grounding etc.
- Your children may already be experiencing social media induced anxiety - in which they have become addicted to notifications, engagement and updates. It is likely that you will see an increase in anxiety when social media is reduced/removed but this is temporary and should not prevent the reduction of use.

## Parent & Teacher Advice

- The use of social media should be heavily restricted and very closely monitored
- It is important that children and young people aren't left in an environment in which they may view upsetting information or commentary.
- Children's use of social media must be limited in the immediate weeks after a trauma to minimise the chances of trauma consumption

## What to do

- Make a communication jar - with each token in the jar saying a form of communication; phone, facetime, sms, whatsapp, writing a letter, doing a drawing, postcard etc and allow children to pick something from the jar rather than using social media.
- Create a 'safe' list of films, tv programmes and videos that children can use to pass time they might usually spend on social media
- Make a list of procrastination activities that children can do when they are feeling the need to escape - reading their favourite books (the ones they've read a hundred times before so it isn't a strain, crafts, lego/modelling
- Many children will still want to engage with friends so it can be beneficial to remove social media apps and put a in code on their reinstallation



# Stage 4: Remember

## Insights

### (things you might feel or notice)

**Resentment:** When someone dies, regardless of the circumstances, it is so hard not to feel angry. It's hard not to think they have left you; that the world has let you down, that you are unfortunate, disadvantaged or destined for a life of unhappiness and hurt. It is normal to wish that it had happened to someone else. Thinking these things don't make you a bad person. Being angry with your friend for leaving you is a normal part of a grieving process but, if this is your leading emotion, you may find that this overrides the positive memories and makes things hard to process and respond to in the future.

**Regret:** I don't know many people that feel that they have done everything right when someone important to them dies. When we lose someone in tragic circumstances, it can be easy to replay things before, moments before, the specific events of the incident and wish you had done something differently - to wish you had done more or less. Regret really only acts to poison the positive memories we have. It is so important to recognise guilt or regret as responses to tragedy rather than true and valid thoughts and feelings as it will tarnish your memories as you move forward and force you to miss out on some of the positive aspects of your friendship that you will wish you had treasured.

**Identity:** I remember realising that I would still 'be the girl whose best friend died' when I was 80 - and that scared the living daylights out of me. Knowing how to respond when something so terrible happens to you is hard and when it is all you can think about, when it has fundamentally changed your life and absorbed you with pain, fear and sadness, it can be hard to remember who you were before the tragedy or consider how you will be after it. Try and hold on to a few of the things that make you, you and slowly spend a little more time focusing on them each day.

*"No one tells you that your actions influence what you remember. I was so angry for so long that all I really remembered was pain. My incredibly, amazing, wonderful friend had just become pain and hurt and anger. It was all I could think of when I thought of him. If you want to remember the good things and the best bits of your friendship, you have to hang on to them as you grieve, let them pull you through the process and out of the other side'.*

## What to do

- A personal positivity jar
- All confidence/esteem worksheets from [www.thereintroductionhub.com](http://www.thereintroductionhub.com)
- An outlet for anger
- Regular practice of calming techniques
- A focus on goals and achievements



# Risks for Remembering

**Confidence/Esteem:** Guilt will eat away at self esteem, confidence and ultimately will have a huge impact on our ability to function, our decision making etc. This can, in the long term, lead up into abusive relationships, violence, crime, drug abuse etc. Guilt is often an emotion rather than a thought. An emotional response to trauma thanks to a valid thought about how we behaved, things we could have done etc. Guilt and our sense of confidence and esteem that impacts it can also be linked to our lack of control - when something happens that is out of our control it can create emotions that we aren't familiar with, that we may label as guilt and that can have profound long term impacts on our self esteem.

**Self Harm/Suicide:** If children are struggling with low self esteem and anger, and also struggle to find a source of positivity - either in the past or as a sense of hope in the future, there is high risk of suicidal ideation or self harm. Children and young people with these feelings are likely to believe there is no hope in their future and they will also probably believe that they somehow deserve this, that they do not deserve anything good to happen and will not be able to achieve anything positive. They may believe they are going to hurt more people or cause more harm.

**Anger/Violence:** Although it is normal and expected to feel angry at what has happened, even angry at people, this can easily spill over into violence, drug abuse or crime. The risk is that people become destructive and reckless when they have no sense of self worth and a lot of anger at the 'world'.

# Pandemic Impact

- Lockdown and COVID-19 related restrictions are likely to have influenced their ability to engage, interact and enjoy time with their friends in the last year and as a result there may be increased feelings of anger/ resentment/ frustration about what they could have done if things were different.
- Lockdown and COVID-19 related restrictions are also likely to impact people's ability today goodbye in an appropriate fashion potentially leading to more issues with creating any form of positivity for children and young people to build upon.
- COVID-19 and the restrictions it is placing upon children and young people is likely to heighten the sense of hopelessness and lack of control that can contribute to suicidal intent.

# Parent Advice

- Acknowledge how hard supporting your child through their trauma response is going to be. Your child is likely to be demanding and difficult. They may well push boundaries, test the rules and project a lot of their anger and frustration on to you and other people within your family. In spite of this, it is really important that you remain calm and supportive in your tone and your actions. You should try and focus on your child's positive traits and attributes, think of things you can thank them for and be thankful of (you might want to write these down for more challenging times).
- It may be useful to remind yourself of basic toddler parenting tips - positive feedback, affirmations, simple, calm instructions, clear explanations of consequence etc. Whilst your child is so overwhelmed with emotion, this is the type of approach you may have to take to discipline; it will ensure you can provide safety and structure for your child without causing further trauma or distress.
- Try to surround your child with positive memories - holiday pictures, pictures of birthday parties etc. It can also be useful to set some form of event or activity for (a reasonable distance) in the future to give them something to look forward to without pressure to overcome their response to trauma too quickly.

# Teacher Advice

- Maintain some structure and really celebrate achievement so that children have some sense of positivity or confidence to build upon
- Adopt a class wide practice of celebrating your pupils, focusing on their positive attributes, traits, skills etc. However small or insignificant - make sure they are delivered in an educational environment/within usual lessons rather than being seen as part of the trauma response - this ensures they feel more genuine.
- Share guilt publicly - the challenge with guilt is that it also comes with shame and the shame makes us internalise and silence or guilty thoughts and feelings. Without sharing our guilt we can not rationalise or process our emotions. It is important to lead by example and vocalise your own feelings of guilt, regret or vulnerability so that your pupils are able to do the same. You could use word clouds that begin with, 'i wish, i hope, i regret' etc and allow the class to add words to them in groups.
- Practice positive remembrance. When we lose old people, perhaps older people that were ill or suffering, we are able to celebrate their life, focus on what they have achieved, what they enjoyed, the family they have created, the legacy they have left etc. When we lose people in tragic circumstances, we lose our ability to do this because we become so focused on what we and they have lost. We mourn their life rather than celebrate it - we imagine what might have been rather than focusing on what was. For our mental health and well being, we must remember young people as if they were young and focus on what they have achieved, what their legacy is and how they have positively impacted our lives and shaped our personalities - in even a small way.

As part of supporting children respond to acute trauma, it's important to remember that you too will need support and may well experience some of the feelings and emotions we have shared, yourself. Ensure you communicate effectively with colleagues, and rely on people in your friends and family network to offer comfort and support.

You may want to use this resource to consider your own response to trauma, which will follow a similar course to children but with a more sophisticated and reasoned understanding of some of the components

**Teach Well Alliance**  
[www.teachwellalliance.com](http://www.teachwellalliance.com)

**PRUSAP**  
[www.prusap.org](http://www.prusap.org)

**The Teacher's Union**  
[www.nasuwat.org.uk](http://www.nasuwat.org.uk)



# Stage 5: Reframe

## Insights

(things you might feel or notice)

**The tragedy snowball:** tragedy, by definition is tragic but the more you let it take off you, your life, your esteem and your identity, the bigger the tragedy will become. When you have been given a huge tragedy snowball to deal with, it is hard enough for you to find a way to accept, overcome and deal with and we have a habit to push it away from us. In pushing it away, the snowball only gets bigger, harder to deal with. It can quickly become such a big snowball that it will become too big for you to be able to ever process it or deal with it. It is really important that you try and consider your snowball and, if you are unable to make it smaller, commit to not making it any bigger in the choices you make in the year after your trauma.

**Making choices:** When we are in the processing trauma, it's difficult to make choices that will benefit us in the long term. It's important that you really consider the short and long term impact of any decisions you make during this time. Choices become habits and you can make a habit of making good choices. It's hard and the real challenge is that in the short term, when it is hardest, there are no rewards at all but in the long term, the rewards will be plentiful.

**Hard habits:** when you have had something terrible happen, it's really easy to feel like the world owes you a favour, that you deserve special treatment. You may believe that people will overlook your bad choices or bad habits or forgive in light of all that has happened. This mindset is really dangerous and can lead to you making bad decisions or behaving in a way that will lead to difficulties in both the short and the long term. Without minimising the severity and huge impact of this tragedy at all, it is important to remember that lots of people will experience really terrible things every day and we will be judged on our decisions, our behaviours and the impact and outcomes of those.

## Pandemic impact

- There are currently lots of examples of communities coming together to achieve good things. There are lots of people leading initiatives that support vulnerable people or create positivity in challenging times.
- It may be difficult to do things in person and with many people facing financial difficulty, it can be harder to raise funds for causes but there are lots of examples of people doing this successfully if children are happy to research examples and think innovatively.

*'I clearly remember the moment that I realised I only ever spoke of him badly. I only ever spoke of the significant pain he caused me in his death. He had just become the person that died and broke me and he deserved to be more than that. I decided that I would let people know who he was in life, who he made me in his life and what his life meant to so many others. It was hard and it was painful but it was the best I could do - for myself and for him.'*



## Risks for Reframing

**Revenge rather than repair:** When we are dealing with all the emotions that comes as part of a trauma response, it is easy to focus on revenge, on being angry and upset and hurt. It can be easy to focus on letting everyone understand how significant your pain is, how hard things have been for you. There is a risk that children and young people are unable to see the alternative or are unable to express and feel that their feelings and emotions are not heard when their behaviours, choices and habits are positive ones. **Significant Destruction:** Children and young people run the risk of responding in ways that cause significant damage that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Children will be at risk of joining gangs, becoming involved in crime, violence, drug abuse etc.

**Ingrained thinking:** It's really normal to respond to this sort of tragedy with a significant period of distress, unhappiness and poor mental health. You may have periods of obsessive thinking, you may experience mood swings or have short periods of time where you harm yourself with eating, drug abuse or blades/scissors or similar. Yet, it's important that these behaviours don't become part of your identity, a consistent part of your behaviour or something that you see as a justified or normalised response.

## What to do:

- Encourage children and young people to think about how they would like to remember the friend they have lost. Ask them to make a list or drawing of the things they want to focus on. It can also be useful to ask children to complete the same task but with the focus of 'how your friend would like to remember you'.
- Think of ways you could spend 100,000 to do good and positive things
- Ask children to think about who will be feeling worse than them (generally, in the world) - who might need their help etc.
- Encourage children to do some situational planning - what will happen if they do x, what will happen if they do y. What will x look like in 3 years, 5 years etc. What are the knock on effects of x, what happens with y. This encouragement of critical, long term thinking is important, particularly when your child is considering the impact of their own behaviours. Although it is important to be gentle, supportive, compassionate etc, as a parent, it is also your job to guide your children, help them understand the difference between right and wrong.

## Teacher Advice

- Provide your pupils with the opportunity to do something 'good' in order to celebrate or remember the friend they have lost, create change, support their families, engage with other people in the same situation etc.
- Create memory jars or a time capsule that is full of stories, positive memories, anecdotes, pieces of work etc about the individual that has died. Make them part of the school forever but do not do it as a marking of their death, do it as a celebration of their life.
- Ask children how they might like to use their experiences - would they like to share their experiences to help others, is there anything they can do to teach others, is there any change or improvement they would like to campaign for, is there anyone that would benefit from fundraising?
- Is there a cause, event, sport or activity that the individual that has died was passionate about or committed to? Is there any work you can do or inspire in their memory?

## Parent Advice

- It is important that children's decisions are safeguarded as much as is possible - minimise their access to drugs, limit their ability to be out of home, school or other supervised care. You should monitor their phones, their social media and have a good awareness of who they are spending time with.
- Give children opportunity to feel inspired by others - looking at people or causes that have done great work when they have been faced with tragedy or adversity can be useful. (help harry help others is a great example)
- Ensure you maintain your usual household structure and remain focus on the usual chores, tasks and responsibilities your child has as part of family life. Although it is useful to be kind and compassionate, being 'soft' won't be beneficial to your children at this stage.
- Your children might be interested in hearing examples of how other people have responded to trauma - it can be useful to search autobiographies, inspirational films etc that will help them find positive inspiration.

As parents, we feel that we have to have solutions for our children. We protect them, guide them, support them and make things better when they are feeling bad. The process of supporting a child as they respond to acute trauma is significant and it is likely to take a significant toll on your own mental health and emotional well being. Rather than feeling the pressure to stay strong, your child is likely to really appreciate your vulnerability. Let them know you don't have answers but that you hurt because they do and that you will do whatever you can to help them. Lead by example - show good practice when taking care of your emotional well being and mental health and ensure you continue to feel connected and close to your child by sharing experiences, expressing feelings and continually communicating.

**MIND**  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)



# Next Steps

## The 2nd stage of our response

**React** - at 6 months to 2 years post trauma, it's important to notice how children and young people are responding to day to day events and emotions. The various reactions will help us understand what emotions are left unresolved and what type of resolution support programme we need to offer to your child.

**Resolve** - the process of resolution is complex and often involves therapy and personalised support. Utilising expert psychiatric care, children and young people will be able to evolve and resolve some of the thoughts, feelings and emotions they have relating to their emotional well being and mental health. (this is where the bereavement bridge may be successfully used)

**Prioritise** - after resolution, children and young people may be left with some areas of their emotional well being that remain vulnerable. They may recognise a number of triggers or indicators of changing mood. Once the most obvious and accessible responses to trauma have been resolved, it can be useful to design a lifestyle that allows children and young people to prioritise their mental health and easily communicate their needs.

**Act** - the final step in the trauma response model is action - this is the stage where we should see a significant improvement in children's behaviour; a return to the characters we may recognise as 'pre-trauma' and where children and young people seem to be more robust, focused and familiar with the ways in which they need to manage and support any remaining challenges.

If you have specific questions or would like to organise further training or support, please email

[info@phoenixeducationconsultancy.com](mailto:info@phoenixeducationconsultancy.com)

For free resources, including The Bereavement Bridge framework and workbook, please visit the resources section at [www.phoenixeducationconsultancy.com](http://www.phoenixeducationconsultancy.com)

If you would like to assess and support children's mental health and emotional well being, please visit [www.thereintroductionhub.com](http://www.thereintroductionhub.com).

Feel free to join us, for a structured chat about Children's mental health on Tuesday's at 8pm by using #kidscovidmh on twitter.

Contact us by using @phoenixedsarah or @phoenixgroupqh

