

When Disaster Strikes

What can schools do to help young people who have suffered trauma? **Justine Wilson-Darke**, Senior Operations Manager, Children & Young People Service for London explains.

Schools are well versed in helping support young people through a wide range of issues from abuse through to eating disorders, bereavement and bullying.

However, in the past few months we've all become acutely aware of another sadly increasingly frequent need – that of supporting young people in the aftermath of traumatic events such as the ones we have recently witnessed at Grenfell Tower, Manchester Arena and London Bridge.

Unsurprisingly teachers, youth leaders and others supporting young people through events that few adults can imagine can feel thrown by finding themselves called upon for help.



In the aftermath of the Manchester Attack a quarter of the calls we received were made directly by children or by those concerned about how best to support children. All of the children calling were seeking support because they had been deeply psychologically affected, with common issues being struggling to sleep, flashbacks, panic attacks and fear of being alone.

So how can teachers best respond to those needing their support?

The most important thing to do is to stress that help is out there. At Victim Support specially trained case-workers provide emotional and practical support to anyone that needs it. Our support is free and confidential and we are there for as long as someone needs us.

There are also smaller, practical steps that can be taken by schools to help a young person come to terms with what they've experienced and gradually overcome the very common feeling of 'being unable to cope'.

1. Re-building confidence: Many young people who have witnessed or directly experienced a traumatic incident completely lose their confidence and this can have a hugely detrimental impact on everything from their schoolwork to their social interactions.



Setting young people small manageable challenges can be a great way of gradually re-building that confidence. Every time they successfully complete a challenge, the sense of achievement they feel is something they can latch onto next time they are feeling overwhelmed by their emotions. Challenges can be anything from holding a mini fundraising event to reading a piece in assembly or helping a younger child with their schoolwork.

2. Managing emotions: For some the excess adrenaline created in the aftermath of a deeply traumatic experience, can cause a feeling of permanent heightened anxiety that can at times feel paralysing.



Giving a young person tools to manage those feelings of anxiety is a practical way of helping. For some physical exercise can be invaluable – going for a jog or having a kick about every time they feel anxious – whilst for others mindfulness training can hold the key to a calmer state of mind.

3. Providing context: For many young people the experience of a traumatic event quite literally rocks their world. It shatters their innocence and can result in them losing faith in the world around them.

Our job as adults is to help them put the event they experienced into context. Give them plenty of access to examples of good in the world and try to ensure that they're not obsessively focusing on the event that they experienced.

In some cases, the young people we've supported in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks have been obsessively trawling the internet for news and videos of the event – effectively re-traumatising themselves on a regular basis.

4. Being sensitive to physical triggers: Flashbacks are a very common affliction suffered by victims of traumatic events and can be triggered by incidents that would go unnoticed by most. Trying to pre-empt and minimise potential triggers such as loud noises, crowded contained areas, the smell of smoke or the sound of alarms can help avoid unnecessary distress.

5. Creating a support network: Talking is so important. Helping young people identify a network of trusted teachers, peers, older peers and organisations they can turn to, helps ensure that they never need to suffer the often overwhelming emotions that victims of traumatic incidents can experience, alone.

Any young person affected by a terrorist attack, traumatic incident or crime can contact the VS's Supportline on 08 08 16 89111. Our support is free and we are here to support victims no matter how long ago an incident took place and for as long as they need our support

If your school would like to fundraise to ensure that victims of terrorist attacks and traumatic incidents can get the support they need today, please contribute to Victim Support's One UK fund at www.justgiving.com/campaigns/charity/victimsupport/oneukappeal.