

The impact of traumatic bereavement on children and young people

When a child or young person experiences the loss of a loved one in traumatic circumstances, the trauma and the grief are often intertwined, meaning that someone who is bereaved is not only grieving the loss of their loved one, which is also affected by the circumstances of their death. This can affect how they think, how they feel, how they behave and how they make sense of and engage with the world around them. In this classroom, this can have an impact on their capacity to learn, process and remember new information.

UNDERSTANDING THE 'WINDOW OF TOLERANCE'

Each of us have what's known as a 'Window of Tolerance'. When we are in our window of tolerance, we are able to think clearly, solve problems, make decisions, take perspective, be curious, and generally perform at our best. However, when someone experiences trauma, their window of tolerance becomes much narrower and they are more easily pushed outside of it into what's called a 'survival mode' because their brain thinks that they are in danger. This survival mode can take two different forms, either:

- hyperarousal (fight or flight). Examples include: Running away, physical or verbal abuse, disruptive or challenging behaviour, avoidance or hypervigilance
- hypoarousal (freeze, collapse). Examples include: Disconnection, shut down, feeling nothing

When someone is in survival mode, their 'thinking brain' simply switches off - it's not needed. This is why it is important to pay attention to whether or not someone is in their window of tolerance and to notice quickly when they have moved outside of it.

Sometimes, even small everyday things can move someone from being inside their window of tolerance (regulated) to outside of it (dysregulated).



SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS

When a child or young person is exposed to trauma their assumptions that the world is a safe and good place are profoundly shattered, leaving them feeling frightened and confused. They may show behaviours such as being easily angered, defensive or disruptive, particularly in the classroom setting. In the aftermath of a trauma, children and young people have to navigate an 'unsafe' world and to work really hard to stay safe and so these are actually 'wise adaptations' to the world around them and a way to protect themselves from further harm and injustice.

ENGAGING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Staying connected. However, children or young people show up in the aftermath of a traumatic loss, staying connected to them is incredibly important. This can be achieved by making a commitment to remain present and accept them where they are, not where you wish they were or where you think they should be. We can often label challenging or disruptive behaviour as 'attention seeking' when in fact a child or young person is seeking attachment.

Offering choices. One of the most powerful things we can offer to children and young people are choices. Even the smallest of choices can help them to regain a sense of control over their lives. For example, letting a child or young person select which member of staff they want to support them during times of stress or distress, or where they want to go if they need time to themselves or away from their peers during the school day.

Understanding behaviour. This is a commitment to understand that all behaviour is a form of communication, a child or young person is trying to tell you something important about their experience. Asking questions and being curious is a good starting point from which to build understanding and to support a child or young person to develop self-awareness. Only once we understand behaviour can we start to think about how we might change it.



Finding out what someone needs. Asking someone what they need can also help them to regain a sense of agency over their own lives, and the world around them. Sometimes children and young people don't know what they need, in such circumstances, offering choices can be useful, if someone doesn't know what they need, they often know what they don't need.

Consistency and clarity. Each of these qualities contribute to establishing a sense of safety and trust for children and young people. Wherever possible, ensuring that children and young people have access to adults they are familiar with, feel comfortable with, and they have selected, will help to recreate certainty and trust. Clarity is concerned with being honest and open with children and young people, wherever possible, helping them to understand why something is the way that it is, inviting them to ask questions, seek more information and supporting them when the answers might not be possible to find.

Kindness. This is critical in all of our engagements with children and young people, no matter how they behave or show up. We must remember the importance of generosity, consideration and understanding and ensure that these inform all of our responses.

Seeking feedback. In addition to asking children and young people what they need, we can also encourage them to tell us what they have found helpful, or, not so helpful. From here we can learn and adapt so that we can meet them where they are, not where we think they may be or where we wish them to be.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

For further information or to arrange a consultation session to discuss how you can support a child or young person, please contact Dr Nicola Lester, clinical consultant for the National Road Victim Service on: consultancy@nicolalester.co.uk

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