Psychological Recovery in Schools

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and managing transition

Developed by Hull City Psychological Service

This guidance has been developed by Hull City Psychological Service to support all educational and community settings in their response to the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to the 'new normal'. The guidance aims to; increase awareness of the school community's possible stress/trauma responses, explore effective strategies for the school community and offer psychological theory to support the identification and referral of the members of the school community who may be at risk of poorer outcomes. This guidance includes;

- A model of support
  - Universal Support; including 5 principles of recovery from trauma
  - Targeted Support; including an understanding of trauma responses
  - Specific Support; including advice on signposting
- Supporting documents
  - Fact Sheet 1: Loss
  - Fact Sheet 2: Risk & Protective Factors (resilience wheel)
  - Ideas Page 1: A sense of safety
  - Ideas Page 2: A sense of calm
  - Ideas Page 3: Self & community efficacy
  - Ideas Page 4: Social Connectedness
  - Ideas Page 5: Promoting Hope
  - Fact Sheet 3: Successful Transition
  - Fact Sheet 4: Strategies to support Transition
  - Fact Sheet 5: Parent & Carer guide to Transition
  - A set of posters to display around your setting

Hull City Psychological Service

Transforming lives with Psychology
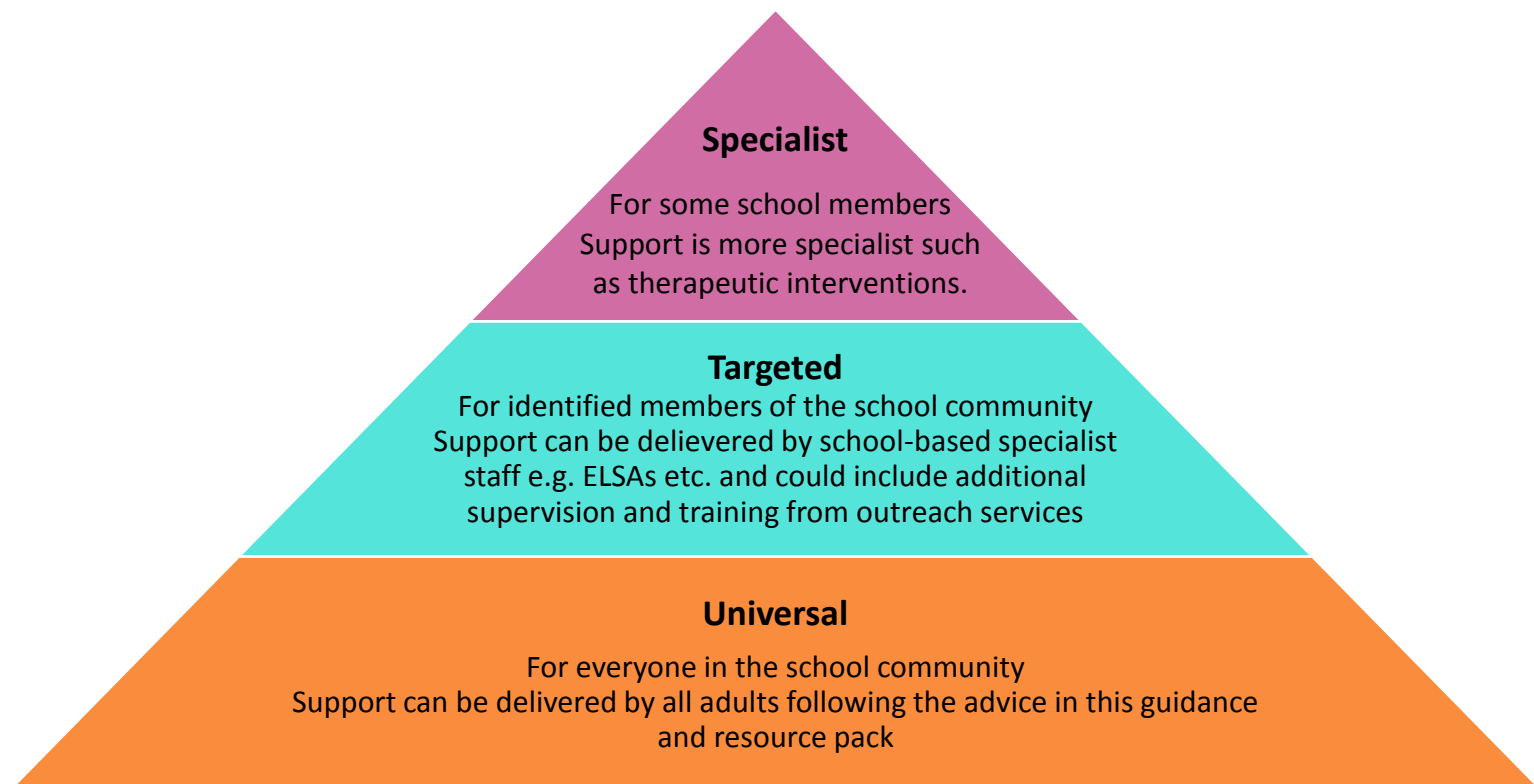
"Making positive change possible"

Hull
City Council

Schools[1] or other educational settings are one of the key environments in children and young people's lives. Whilst not dismissing the great challenges, enabling children to return to school is a crucial part of normalising life after a crisis event. It restores some predictability in daily routine, reconnects children to other children and to school staff, and provides a context within which children can process the experiences they have just been through.

Similarly, work often provides these functions for adults. Within the present context, school staff are likely to have experienced losses and disruptions in their own lives. It is therefore important that they too, have peer support available to help them manage any strong feelings and feel re-connected (Bhardwaj et al., 2020). This will hopefully, in turn, enhance their potential to support others in the school community. It will be important to implement procedures and support networks to identify any members of the school community that may require additional or specialist support. This could be children, young people or adults, whatever their role or position in the school.

Support across the school community needs to be available at three different levels:

Specialist
For some school members
Support is more specialist such
as therapeutic interventions.

Targeted
For identified members of the school community
Support can be delievered by school-based specialist
staff e.g. ELSAs etc. and could include additional
supervision and training from outreach services

Universal
For everyone in the school community
Support can be delivered by all adults following the advice in this guidance
and resource pack

---

[1] Within this document, the word 'school' refers to any educational setting such as primary and secondary schools, specials schools, nurseries, colleges, post-16 settings and alternative provisions. These resources may also be helpful for community groups.

Universal Support

This level of the stepped approach in the pyramid highlights the support that needs to be available for all members of the school community.

Primarily, any response will need to be based on the school being an emotionally responsive community full of people who are emotionally available to each other. There will need to be a prioritising of emotional wellbeing over 'catch up': there is no going back, instead only going on to something or somewhere different. Schools should not underestimate the wealth of knowledge and skills they already have. Some staff may have received more specialist training in emotional support, for example, those who have trained as Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs). Many staff will have already developed emotionally responsive ways of being with children and young people through their own personal qualities and experience. However, they may need reassurance that they are able to offer what is needed by the children and young people, their colleagues and some families within the community.

Some members of the school community will have found many positives in their recent lives and may also find the return to school a positive experience. However, others will need their return to be more emotionally supportive. They may find it difficult to verbally express their feelings for a wide variety of communicative, social or emotional reasons so it will be important to stay vigilant and respond to behaviour as communication.

It may be helpful for your school to follow an approach based on the five identified key principles (Hobfall et al., 2007) that support recovery following a disaster or serious incident. The five principles are:

1. *A sense of safety*: It will be important for everyone in the setting to feel as safe as is possible when they return to school. Clearly there is the need to follow guidelines to maintain physical safety but also to behave in ways that create the feeling of psychological safety. In the initial stages, both of these aspects of safety may require some 'thinking aloud' to convey that a sense of uncertainty is normal in the current times. This may include acknowledging that the event is not over, that we can only do our best to reduce risk and, that some of our feelings of anxiety may be helping us to keep ourselves safe by following difficult rules. It will also be important to realise that some people may feel safer in school and their return will provide a sense of relief. [See Ideas Page 1]

2. *A sense of calm*: Strong emotions, numbing and anxiety are expected short-term responses to traumatic stress; these do not necessarily signal the need for additional intervention beyond the universal level. Some people may also experience strong positive emotions, such as excitement, on their return to school. It will be important to have activities, spaces and relationships that help people manage these emotions and restore a sense of calm. [See Ideas Page 2]

3. ***A sense of self- and collective- efficacy***: Children need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them, and a belief that their actions are likely to lead to generally positive outcomes (Bandura, 1997). They need to feel they belong to a group that is likely to experience positive outcomes and this is known as collective efficacy (Antonovsky, 1979; Benight, 2004). Research suggests that following a traumatic event people are at risk of losing their sense of competency (Foa & Meadows, 1997; Resick & Schnicke, 1992); an important part of this recovery will be reversing this negative view of the self, the family and the community to overcome adversity. [See Ideas Page 3]

4. ***Social connectedness***: It is important that adults, children and young people feel they belong and have a social network which can support them within their school community. A common response to difficult events is to connect with and seek support from loved ones (Bleich et al., 2003; Stein et al., 2004); an important part of the recovery will be facilitating 're-connection' of these social networks. [See Ideas Page 4]

5. ***Promoting hope***: Whilst life may be difficult at the moment, it is important that adults, children and young people feel the situation will improve in the future. Staff and pupils need to be provided with reassurance and understand that in the longer term, they can feel positive again. Hope can be thought of as "a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected" (Antonovsky, 1979); in this way, hope is based on our past experiences and a belief that services and sources of support act benevolently in our best interests. [See Ideas Page 5]

With thanks to guidance from Northamptonshire EPS and the Microsoft Teams national working party of Educational Psychologists/Education Professionals which this section has been adapted from

Targeted Support

This level of the stepped approach in the pyramid relates to the identification of members in the school community who may be at risk of poorer recovery.

What do we mean by recovery at an individual level?

Recovery:

- Feelings associated with the event no longer overwhelm or threaten to overwhelm the person. They might be able to talk about how they felt at the time and how they feel now without seeming 'stuck' in that emotion.
- The person feels a sense of restored self-worth - they start to recognise and re-engage with what they value about themselves and their life.
- The person feels more positive about relationships again – they feel connected, attached or optimistic about their ability to enjoy their time with others.
- The person is able to assign new meaning to what the event means for them - the impact it has had on their life, how they have changed or even grown as a person, what they have learnt about themselves, others and the world.

It may be helpful to consider these feelings and stress reactions within the psychological concept of trauma.

Psychological trauma

The word 'trauma' carries a range of different meanings. In general, trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. In the current circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a 'traumatic event' and each one of us will experience the ongoing pandemic in different ways depending upon our own individual circumstances;

> "Psychological trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or of enduring conditions in which the individual's ability to integrate his or her emotional experience is overwhelmed (i.e. his or her ability to stay present, understand what is happening, integrate the feelings, and make sense of the experience), or the individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity." (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60)

> "Trauma is an experience or series of experiences and/or impacts from social conditions that break or betray our inherent need for safety, belonging and dignity." (Staci K.Haines)

Everyone processes a traumatic event differently because we all face them through the lens of our own prior experiences. It is important to emphasise that although our reactions can range in severity, any traumatic stress reaction is a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances and is not a sign of an underlying 'pathology' or 'disorder'. We can often feel pressurised into having to adopt a very 'British' stiff upper lip and 'just get on with it' and this can be compounded by social media, encouraging us to use our time productively.

Our experiences of trauma can impact upon all areas of our day-to-day functioning, and the COVID-19 pandemic may provoke reactions in both children and adults that are familiar to us and that we may have successfully responded to in previous circumstances. Therefore, the nurture/attachment aware and trauma informed approaches that you are already implementing in your schools will remain relevant and helpful during this time.

Although the pandemic may elicit a range of responses in us all that may feel overwhelming, it is also important to highlight that for many children and families, this may also have been a positive time and will not automatically feel 'traumatic'. Therefore, a person-centred approach will be helpful to understand the unique meaning that each child/person has made in response to the current situation.

(Much of the guidance suggested in the Hull City Psychological Service booklet '**Meeting the needs of children who have experienced developmental trauma:** A guide for school staff' will be helpful to consider – please contact the service for a copy)

Understanding people's post-event responses

One way to consider responses to an extreme or distressing event is as a complex interaction between the person, the environments in which they live and function and the event that has taken, or is still taking place (Harvey, 1996).

**Person** ✕ **Environment** ✕ **Event**
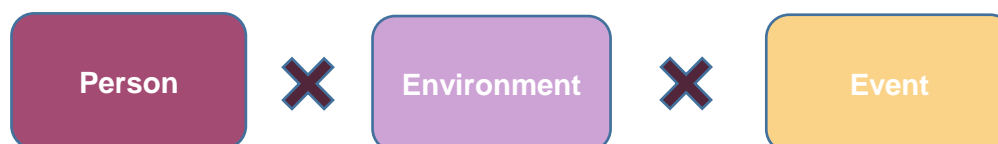
The interrelationship of person x environment x event is thought to improve or impede a person's recovery. This kind of thinking can also help to focus where intervention may be needed most.

Person
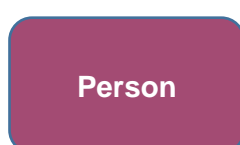
Although people are uniquely different from one another, there are certain factors and capabilities in our lives that have been shown to influence our ability to withstand and recover from adversity. These are sometimes known as 'protective factors' which give people psychological 'cover' and help to reduce the likelihood of negative psychological effects when faced with hardship or suffering. There are also other factors called 'risk factors' which are thought to increase the likelihood of negative psychological effects. [Some examples of these can be found in the Risk & Protective Factors Fact Sheet 2]

Thinking about pre-COVID-19, individual factors may offer schools a starting point in identifying those members of the school community who may need more support. However, within the context of the current situation there are likely to be other factors which will influence people's responses and 'psychological cover'. These might include experiences that are more 'visible' to schools such as bereavement or fear about the safety of family members who are frontline workers. They may also include less 'visible' experiences that settings may not know about such as, loss of access to key people who usually offer emotional or physical support, which could only become known through active listening to the person.
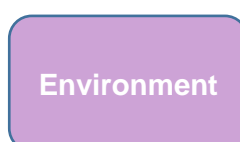
Environment

Different factors in a person's environment have also been found to influence their response. These can, again, be thought of in terms of risk and protective factors across family, school and community settings. [Some examples are shared in the Risk & Protective Factors Fact Sheet 2]. During this event, familiar home environments may have become unfamiliar, perhaps providing greater sources of risk or protection for people. School community members will have been away from school or in school but experiencing it in an unfamiliar way.

It would be unrealistic to think that children and young people will be able to return to the school environment and pick up the curriculum exactly where they left off. Thinking about it in terms of a 'recovery curriculum' involving 'Compassionate Leadership' within schools will be a crucial part of this. It may be challenging to balance the need for results and raising attainment, which of course is fundamentally important, with the professional and moral responsibility to support the community's psychological recovery from this pandemic. Here, compassion can be the key organising principle promoting the highest, collective values and positive outcomes at the whole school level. Successful schools are built upon compassionate values driven by good educational leadership; in such schools, compassion can be 'caught', learned by children and young people as they model their behaviours on those they look up to. How leaders and staff behave, and how students behave with each other and adults, is fundamental to the ethos of the school and the dissemination of compassionate values. Compassion can also be 'taught' and cultivated purposefully through the breadth of the curriculum, the learning contexts, the pedagogies and a focus on engaging and involving children and young people. Now is the time to return to more humanistic approaches concerned with the fundamental wellbeing, and secure positive development of the child; without this it will be difficult to achieve the positive academic results we usually strive towards.

> *"Leadership is always important. At great social turning points it is more important than ever. At times like these, the leadership we need is not leadership that turns us against others or holds us back in awe. It is leadership that lifts us up and turns us around together in pursuit of a common cause that expresses and advances our humanity". (Andy Hargreaves & Dennis Shirley, 2009)*

Event

It would be difficult to ignore the scale of the event. Everyone's lives have been impacted either through COVID-19 directly or through the impact of the preventative measures in place at various times. This may make people less inclined to ask for help as they are aware that everyone may have suffered to some degree.

If we think in this 'person x environment x event' way about our psychological response, it is important to consider the changing nature of the event and how this may be impacting on people's psychological responses. This event is unlikely to be 'over' when the school community returns and the environment may still not feel (or even be) safe on return to school.

Although we talk of the pandemic as if it is a singular event in time, it is perhaps better pictured as a series of stressful events that will be unique for us all. It will be important to listen to someone's story to help understand what the 'event' or 'events' mean for them and what support they might need.

Specialist Support

This level of the stepped approach in the pyramid relates to the identification and referral for members of the school community who are at the greatest risk and are more likely to experience poorer outcomes without specialist support.

Trauma-related experiences, loss, and ongoing post-trauma stresses can lead to strong physical and emotional reactions that can occur off and on for weeks, months, or years. These reactions can include physiological responses such as rapid heartbeat, rapid breathing, or feeling tense or nervous, and upsetting emotional responses such as feeling afraid, worried, angry, sad, or frustrated. Such reactions may lead to sleep difficulties or difficulties with interpersonal relationships with family members or friends, and difficulties functioning at school. These responses are common in both children and adults and can be considered a completely 'normal' reaction the difficult situation we're living through. Usually these responses are best responded to within the school community, using the model outlined above. However, for some, the post-trauma response may be particularly overwhelming or enduring and may require more specialist intervention from supportive services such as Hull City Psychological Service or CAMHS.

Schools are well placed to monitor members of their community, showing sensitivity to the signs that they may need to be supported in a different or enhanced way. This might become more clear in the coming terms and months as those who are struggling to manage and recover with the support available at the 'universal' and 'targeted' level of this model becoming more apparent. Schools could discuss any worries they have about individuals or about how to effectively monitor well-being with their link Educational Psychologist.

If you think a member of the school community requires specialist support as their post-trauma responses haven't gone away after a graduated approach to supporting them in school you should contact the most appropriate specialist service;

Hull City Psychological Service

Transforming lives with Psychology

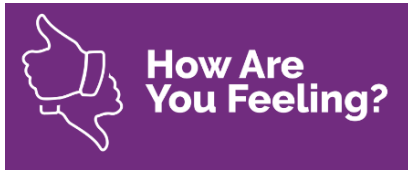*"Making positive change possible"*

HCPS Contact: 01482 614258

http://hull.mylocaloffer.org/s4s/WhereILive/Council?pageId=3848

CAMHS Contact Point: 01482 303688

https://camhs.humber.nhs.uk/

https://youngminds.org.uk/

https://www.kooth.com/

HeadStart Hull

headstarthull@hullcc.gov.uk

https://www.howareyoufeeling.org.uk/

Hull & East Yorkshire Mind: 01482 240200

https://www.heymind.org.uk/

Samaritans: 116 123

https://www.samaritans.org/

Let's Talk: Hull Depression & Anxiety Services
01482 247111
https://www.letstalkhull.co.uk/#

References

Bhardwaj, A., Byng, C. & Morrice, Z. (2020). A rapid literature review of how to support the psychological well-being of school staff and social workers during and after Covid-19. unpublished

Harvey, M. R. (1996). An ecological view of psychological trauma and trauma recovery. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, **9** (1), 3-23.

Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P., Bell, C. C., Bryant, R. A., Brymer, M. J., Friedman, M. J., Friedman, M., Gersons, B. P. R., de Jong, J. T. V. M., Layne, C. M., Maguen, S., Neria, Y., Norwood, A. E., Pynoos, R. S., Reissman, D., Ruzek, J. I., Shalev, A. Y., Solomon, Z., Steinberg, A. M., & Ursano, R. J. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid–term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, **70**(4), 283-315, DOI: 10.1521/psyc.2007.70.4.283

Woods, D. (2017). *The Compassionate School Leader: Think piece No 4.* The Co-Ed Foundation.

Hull City Psychological Service
Transforming lives with Psychology
"Making positive change possible"

Hull
City Council