Coping with Trauma

Being involved in a trauma can be very frightening and it is not surprising that most children and young people will be upset for a few days afterwards. You may notice a number of changes and find that:

- You can't stop thinking about the trauma.
- There are times when it feels like the trauma is happening all over again.
- You have difficulty sleeping at nights.
- You have bad dreams.
- You become very frightened or upset by things that remind you of your trauma.
- You feel angry or irritable with friends and family.
- You don't want to think or talk about what happened.
- You are reluctant to go out or be with others.

For most people these changes last only a couple of weeks, although some children find that the effects of the trauma last longer. If this happens you may want to try some of these ideas to see if they help.

They don't always work but if you practise enough there will be some times when they may make you feel better and more in control.

Stopping trauma thoughts and pictures

There may be times when you find that you cannot stop thinking about your trauma. Thoughts and memories may keep going round and round in your head like a videotape which you cannot switch off. You may find that this happens more when you are not very busy or if something reminds you about it.

You could try to control your thoughts by teaching yourself to think about something else. Rather than listening to worrying thoughts about the trauma you can try to learn how to switch the videotape off. This can be done in different ways and you will need to experiment to see what works for you.
Describe what you see

Describe to yourself in a lot of detail what is going on around you. Describe what you see as quickly as you can and think about colours, shapes, size, textures, what things are made of, etc. By concentrating on the things you see you stop thinking about the trauma. You will need to practise and, remember, it probably won’t work straight away.

Thinking puzzles

You may want to squeeze out trauma memories by setting yourself thinking puzzles. This could be done in lots of ways, such as:

- counting backwards from 123 in 9’s
- spelling the names of your family backwards
- naming the records of your favourite group
- naming all the players in your favourite sports team.

The puzzles have to be hard enough to challenge you and make you think; so don’t make them too easy.

Activities

Some people find that activities are a good way of switching off. The idea is that the activity takes over and drowns out any thoughts or memories about the trauma. When you notice that you are thinking about your trauma, try one of the activities you find helpful.

Crosswords, reading, watching the TV/video, listening to the radio or music or whatever you find useful.

The more you concentrate on what you are doing, the more you drown out any trauma thoughts.

Turn the video off

People involved in traumas sometimes find that pictures of it keep popping into their minds. It is almost like part of the trauma has been videotaped and is played over and over again. Learning how to turn the video off can be useful.

Imagine a picture of a video player. You may find that looking at your own video player at home can help you get a good picture.
Concentrate on this, and imagine yourself putting a video in the machine and turning the player on. As you turn it on, the video will start and you will see the pictures of your chosen video. Now imagine yourself turning the video off. Really concentrate on the ‘off’ switch and, as you touch the button, notice how the video stops. Practise turning the video player in your mind on and off. When the video starts playing pictures from your trauma, imagine yourself turning the video off and watching the screen go blank.

Write your worries down

You may have lots of memories about the trauma and see pictures of it time and time again. Some people have a different sort of memory and may feel responsible, guilty, angry or somehow to blame for what happened. These thoughts are very troubling and, because no one hears or questions them, they tend to stay racing around in your head.

Sometimes it is useful to empty out your head and clear them away. Seeing them written down on paper can help you to think more clearly and make you feel better.

Write down your trauma worries on a piece of paper.

Think of them all and write them down.

Once you have finished, scrunch up your paper tightly and throw them in the bin!

Sleeping

Night-times can be difficult as it is often the time when thoughts about the trauma seem to happen most. The more you listen, the worse they seem to become and so it is helpful to try to break out of this cycle.

Settling at night

A relaxing night-time routine may help you to fall asleep easier and give you less chance to think about your trauma. Think about the things that help you relax and see if they can become part of your night-time routine:

- Have a quiet ‘wind down’ time before going to bed.
  - A warm drink or a bath may make you feel relaxed.
  - A comfortable room (not too hot or cold).
  - Leave the light on if it helps.
  - Put the radio or TV on a timer switch, so they turn off after you fall asleep.

- If you find it takes a long time before you fall asleep, then try to go to bed later. Staying up later may help you to settle quicker.
Waking at nights and bad dreams

Sometimes you may find that you wake in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep again. This is a time when you may be troubled by thoughts about your trauma. The more you listen to your thoughts, the worse you feel. Once again it may be useful to try to concentrate on something else:

- Put on your personal stereo and listen to your favourite CD. If you fall asleep the machine will turn itself off.
- Try reading a chapter of a book or a favourite magazine for a few minutes to settle you again.

Learn to relax

Thinking about your trauma or reminders of it may make you feel frightened or worried. Learning to relax might help you to feel better. There are lots of different ways to relax and you will have to find what way works best for you.

Controlled breathing

There are times when you may suddenly start to become tense or worked up and won’t have time to go through any relaxation exercises. Controlled breathing is a quick method to help you regain control and relax. You can use this method anywhere and often people don’t even notice what you are doing!

Slowly draw in a deep breath, hold it for 5 seconds and then very slowly let it out. As you breathe out, say to yourself 'relax'. Doing this a few times will help you regain control of your body and help you feel calmer.

Calming pictures

With this method you make yourself feel more pleasant by thinking about those things you find nice or restful.

Try thinking about your dream place. It could be somewhere you have been or your fantasy. Imagine a picture of it in your mind, making the picture as restful and peaceful as possible. Try to make the picture as real as you can and think about:

- the noise of the waves crashing on the beach
- the wind blowing in the trees
- the smell of the sea or pine forests
- the warm sun shining on your face
- the wind blowing gently through your hair.
You need to practise so that you can really imagine your dream place. If you start to feel unpleasant, then try turning the picture on. Really concentrate hard on your restful scene and see if it helps you to relax.

**Physical exercise**

Some people find that physical exercise is a helpful way to relax. If physical exercise works for you, then use it. If possible it may be particularly useful to try at those times you notice strong unpleasant feelings.

A good run, brisk walk or swim can help you get rid of any angry or anxious feelings.

**Facing your fears**

You may find that you become very worried about things that remind you of your trauma. You may become very worried if you go past the place where the trauma happened or if you are reminded about events or people involved in the trauma. This is very understandable and most people feel like this for a short time afterwards. For others this feeling becomes very strong and may stop you from doing the things you would really like to do. You may:

- give up trying to do things
- become reluctant to try anything new
- avoid situations you think will be difficult.

When this happens you need to face your fears and learn to overcome them. The following ideas might help.

**Practise being successful**

When faced with difficult challenges we often think that we will not be successful. We are very good at predicting failure and thinking that things will go wrong. Thinking like this means that you will feel more anxious and more reluctant to try.

A useful way forward is to imagine a picture of your challenge in your mind and to talk yourself through what will happen. Think about the steps involved and imagine yourself coping and being successful. Make your picture as real as possible and describe your scene in lots of detail.

Practising this a few times will help you to recognise that, while it might be difficult, you can be successful.
Small steps

Sometimes challenges seem too big to tackle in one go. At these times it might be useful to break the task down into smaller steps. Someone who is feeling very frightened about travelling in a car might, for example, break this down into the following steps.

- Sit for a minute in a stationary car.
- Sit in a stationary car with the engine running.
- Go for a very short ride on a quiet road.
- Go for a slightly longer ride on a quiet road.
- Go for a short ride on a busier road.
- Go for a longer ride.

Because each step is small it increases the chances of success and moves you closer to your overall target. Practise each step a few times until you feel confident enough to go on to the next. Remember, praise yourself when you have been successful – you have done well!

Positive self-talk

A useful way of helping yourself through a difficult or worrying situation is by using self-talk. Positive self-talk helps you to feel more relaxed and confident by keeping doubts and worries under control. You do this by saying positive things to yourself when you feel worried or unsure if you will be successful.

- I am going to go back to that place again.
- I have managed to get to the door and now I am going in.

Repeat your positive message and praise yourself as you face your challenge.

Talk about it

You may find it difficult to talk with other people about your trauma. You may want to try to forget about it. At other times you may feel that people aren’t interested in what happened or you may worry that they will become upset if you talk about how you are feeling. This isn’t always helpful and, although it might be hard, it is often good to try to talk about what happened.

Traumas are very frightening and upsetting events. They are difficult to understand. Talking about it may help you make sense of what happened.