Guidance for meeting emotional needs and supporting recovery following a sad or distressing event

Supporting staff wellbeing following a critical incident

A critical incident can affect adults in different ways. Some may experience strong feelings immediately, while others may notice changes later or show little outward reaction. For some people, the event may bring back memories of previous losses or difficult experiences. **Needing support is not a sign of weakness or a lack of professional capability.**

Staff may be supporting children, families and colleagues while also managing their own responses. Supporting staff wellbeing should therefore be a shared responsibility, with practical arrangements that allow people to seek help, take breaks and share demands.

Ways to look after yourself

- **Stay connected in ways that suit you**. Spending time with trusted people may help, but you may also need quiet time or space.
- **Choose whether and when to talk.** You do not need to describe the incident or discuss your feelings before you feel ready. Support should not depend on recounting what happened.
- **Recognise your limits.** Let an appropriate colleague or manager know if you need help, a break or a temporary change to your responsibilities. You do not have to manage everything yourself.
- **Attend to everyday needs.** Make time for food, drinks, rest and sleep, even when usual routines feel difficult.
- **Maintain familiar routines where helpful.** Allow flexibility and avoid putting pressure on yourself to return immediately to your usual pace.
- **Choose activities that help you feel settled.** Gentle movement, time outdoors, music, familiar interests or relaxation may help. There is no single approach that suits everyone.
- **Allow yourself moments of enjoyment.** Resting, laughing or enjoying an activity does not diminish the seriousness of what happened or your care for those affected.
- **Protect confidentiality when seeking support.** You can talk about how you are feeling without sharing identifying or sensitive information about children, families or colleagues. Use appropriate professional support where needed.

- **Ask for advice whenever you are concerned.** You do not need to wait for difficulties to become severe or continue for a particular length of time.

How leaders and colleagues can help

- **Offer sensitive, private check-ins,** without requiring staff to disclose personal experiences or feelings.
- **Share responsibilities fairly**. Notice when emotional support and incident-related tasks are falling disproportionately on a small number of staff.
- **Make practical support available**, including breaks, cover, manageable workloads and temporary adjustments where needed.
- **Respect different preferences and needs.** Offer choices about support rather than assuming everyone will benefit from the same approach.
- **Make support routes clear,** including who staff can approach if they would prefer not to speak with their line manager.
- **Continue support beyond the immediate response.** Revisit arrangements as needs change, including around reminders or anniversaries.

Supportive check-ins and practical reviews should not become compulsory sessions in which staff are expected to relive the incident. NICE advises against psychologically focused debriefing for preventing or treating post-traumatic stress disorder.

Accessing further support

Speak with your GP or an appropriate professional if you are concerned about your wellbeing, particularly if difficulties are worsening or affecting sleep, relationships, work or everyday activities. Occupational health or an employee assistance programme may also be available through your employer.

Teachers and education staff can contact Education Support on 08000 562 561 for emotional support from a qualified counsellor. You do not need to be in crisis to call. Professional confidentiality has limits where there are safety concerns.

For urgent mental health support in England, call NHS 111 and select the mental health option (2). Call 999 or go to A&E if someone's life is at risk or you cannot keep yourself or someone else safe.

The EPS can provide further advice and signposting where required.