Fact Sheet One:

Being Safe

Rebuilding a sense of security and safety

**To help support you as you adjust to life in the UK, we have created a series of factsheets, designed to offer some support and strategies, whatever your situation, and are based on what we know about people’s responses to traumatic events and what can help.**

These series of factsheets do not claim to have all the answers and solutions to the difficulties you may have been experiencing. They aim to provide you with information to help you understand your bodies normal responses to the experiences you have recently endured. They will provide you with some strategies to understand you and your children’s emotional responses and using the evidence we have from what can help recover from traumatic experiences, so that it becomes something you lived through not something that defines you and your family’s life forever. There are suggestions of activities you can do that will improve you and your family’s psychological safety.

Being safe emotionally and physically is the basic need all humans have. It is often something we take for granted. You have just experienced the unimaginable – all that was stable and consistent and safe in your life has been taken from you.

While you may now be physically safe, you and your children are having to come to terms with a new country, the loss of your home, maybe family, culture, possessions, pets, job, career, and numerous other personal losses.

You and your children may have witnessed sights beyond belief and been forced to make decisions never anticipated.

Most of what you feel emotionally can be viewed as normal reactions to extremely abnormal situations. Our bodies produce hormones and chemicals to help us deal with fear and horror that are ultimately about our survival. You may have been living with these excess hormones for a significant period of time before you reached a place of physical safety.

Without understanding the physiological stress response, you can end up stuck with high levels of stress chemicals in your body and constantly feeling frightened, anxious, stressed, irritable, angry and like a pressure cooker about to explode. It can affect sleep, appetite, concentration, ability to connect to others, moods, and all areas of day-to-day life. Adults in this position sometimes turn to coping strategies that work in the short run (alcohol, drugs, exercise, isolate themselves, withdraw) but which are not going to be effective in the long term. Children also find ways of managing the excess stress, (withdraw, be over good, become moody, have outbursts, make unhelpful friendships, find school difficult or avoid it, are unable to concentrate in class, become naughty, play truant and others).

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The safety in your lives you had previously taken for granted has gone.

Evidence tells us that factors important in developing well-being for those that have been forced into refugee status and that enable recovery from the experience are:

* Rebuilding a sense of security and safety
* Developing attachments and social groups
* Support in developing plans and goals for the future
* Maintaining a sense of cultural identity
* Developing a way of communicating the traumatic experience

The aim of these factsheets is to give you some strategies to look after your children by looking after yourself. If you have ever flown on a plane, you may remember the air steward safety briefing – ‘in the event of loss of oxygen, a mask will drop down in front of you. **PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON** first before helping others’. In effect if you don’t you will pass out before you can help anyone else. It’s the same in this crisis, to help your children you need to be able to look after your own emotional health and safety first.

What we know is - It is difficult to be the emotionally available adult when you are scared yourself.

**As a first step, consider how do you feel:**

* Scared
* Tired
* Irritable
* Unreal
* Tearful
* Panicked
* Angry

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Do you feel some of these emotions? All of these? Maybe lots of others – just to reassure you that these are normal and to be expected responses in such a difficult time. Whether you have children or not the first step in managing the emotions and behaviors your trauma has triggered is to understand that the reactions are normal. We know from all the research that experiencing trauma and war trauma generate bodily and emotional responses. The aim of this factsheet is to share what we know about responses to trauma and them provide some techniques that can help to make you feel psychologically safer.

**We know that common reactions to experiences of danger and trauma are:**

* Sleeping – too much, not enough, having nightmares
* Eating - too much (including hording food, overeating) or having no appetite
* Health – feeling generally unwell all the time (stomach aches, headaches, nausea)
* Difficulty connecting with and trusting others, including peers and those wanting to support you
* Changes in concentration - difficultly paying attention may feel and seen spacy or forgetful
* Behavior may change – being defiant with others, withdrawn, isolate
* Emotional changes – you may feel overwhelmed, be moody and irritable, feel explosive and find it hard to regulate your emotions, you may be angry or distressed.
* You may still feel constantly in danger and be looking out for it
* You may be hyper vigilant, nervous, and jumpy
* You may be triggered by smells, sights, feeling or other stimuli that take you back to a fearful memory or experience.
* You may be unable to stop thinking about what happened to you individually and what is still happening in Ukraine.

There may be other changes you are experiencing that do not fit into these categories, but the chances are that if these are different to your previous behaviors and mood pre the war then they are likely to have been caused by it.

Fight, Flight & Freeze

Our bodies initial response when there is increased risk of threat and danger, is one of fight or flight. This makes learning new information and concentrating on anything other than the risk quite hard.

Understanding the ’fight, flight, freeze’ response which is a biological response to fear can help us manage the way it makes us, and our bodies, feel.

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Below is a list of how the body responds to fear. Remember the brain thinks it is helping, this is a completely unconscious response, and it happens when a part of the brain (the amygdala) thinks there is danger to you. It sets in place a series of reactions that are not within our conscious control. Our brain releases stress hormones (mainly cortisol and adrenaline) that are designed to give us extra strength and energy to either run away or fight.

This response in our body is controlled and activated by a part of our system called the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). The sympathetic state is one of movement and action.

It’s the same system that unconsciously administers the chemicals and hormones we need for survival – for example it monitors your insulin and your thyroxine so that your daily metabolism works effectively without you having to think about it.

The SNS is kind of a “business as usual” system that keeps the basic functions of your body working as they should without you having to think about it.

If we move from experiencing something that is dangerous to feeling a threat to life, fight or flight may not be successful in protecting us from the danger & our bodies may go into the freeze or flop response. This produces different physiological responses in our bodies and can lead to immobilization or collapse and a shutting down of our emotions and feelings. This is also unconscious, we have no conscious control over this response, it is our bodies way of trying to protect us.

Diagram

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* **Increase in sweating** – The body is keeping itself cool in case of exertion
* **Pupils dilate** – Allows for more light to enter the eyes, leading to improved vision
* **Hearing is distorted or lost** – the Cochlea (part of the inner ear) sends a message to the brain to protect the ear from potential loud noises
* **Breathing gets faster** – breathing quickens as the heart beats fast; your lungs need to get more oxygen into the body
* **Blush or go pale** – Blood may be rushing to your head (blush) or blood may be racing to parts of the body where it is needed more (pale) e.g. muscle groups
* **Muscles tense/shake** – your muscles are getting prepared to run or fight with a rush of blood
* **Heart beats faster/Blood pressure increases** – the heart is beating faster and the blood pressure increases ensuring that enough oxygen is being pumped around the body
* **Dry mouth** – saliva production stops because the digestive system shuts down
* **Hairs stand on end/Goosebumps** – hair follicles are attached to our muscles so when our muscles contract the hairs stand up
* **Butterflies in stomach** – stomach muscles will become sensitive as blood leaves them to fuel other parts of the body e.g., muscles
* **Bladder /Wet ourselves** – as with other muscles the bladder contracts making us want to urinate
* **Bowels Empty** – Evolutionary science suggests the body is making itself lighter to run, physiological theories suggest the sphincter relaxes resulting in defecation

It really can help us all to think of the body responses as automatic and designed to help.

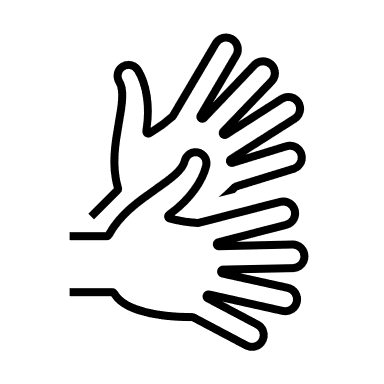
The challenge is that after the danger is over and you are physically safe this response can be triggered by a sudden memory, smell, noise, or any individual trigger that suggests threat.

It can help to have some strategies to manage them when they happen. They can feel overwhelming as though we are going mad, going to pass out, and we might behave in ways we wouldn’t normally.

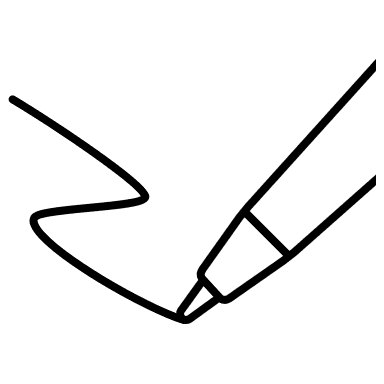
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Understanding that this is not in your or your children’s conscious control is a start to being able to manage these overwhelming emotions.

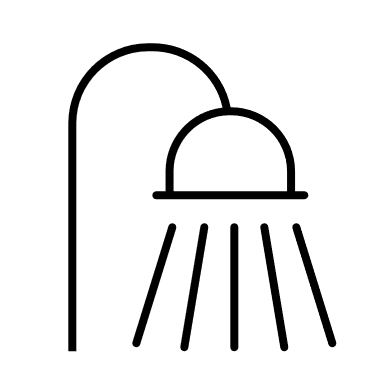
It can also help to learn some simple “grounding techniques” that you can practice and will help you to regulate your emotions when they start to feel out of control. They can be practiced with your children as well, as they work for all ages

**Grounding techniques**

1. Wiggle your fingers, tap your feet. Pay attention to the movement; you are in control of what your body is doing, right here and now.

2. Eat or drink something. Is it hot, or cold? Sweet, or sour?

3. Write a letter or card to someone you care about.

4. Use your voice. Say your name or pick up a book and read the first paragraph you find out loud.

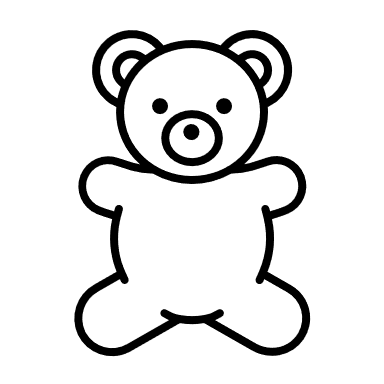
5. Take a shower/bath. Notice the sensations of the water.

6. Call a friend and have a chat.

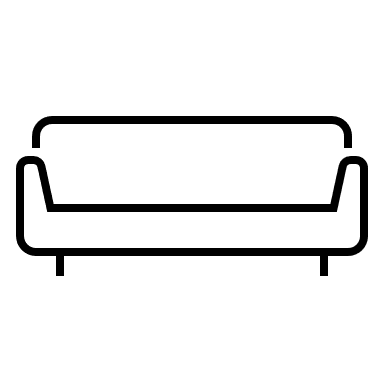
7. Hold an ice cube and let it melt in your hand.

8. Play a distracting game on your tablet, computer, or smartphone.

9. Take a look outside. Count the number of trees and street signs.

10. Turn up the radio or play your favourite song LOUDLY. You could even dance!

11. Write out what’s going on. Keep writing until you start to notice it makes a difference and it lets out some of the things you’re anxious about.

12. Hold onto something comforting. Maybe a blanket or an old stuffed toy.

13. Put on your favourite movie or TV show.

14. Sit in a chair and really focus on feeling the material that the chair arms are made of and concentrate on the feel of the chair under your feet.

Once you’ve found which techniques help, make a list to put on your wall, or carry in your pocket.

Share these with other family members and maybe come up with some things of your own or that are unique to your family.

**Finally, one more activity to help promote feelings of safety for your children.**

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An idea is to create imaginary ‘worry friend’. The idea is that at night your children can write down any worries they have and pop them into the ‘worry friend’ jar. As parents we then take the pieces of paper out once the child is asleep and magic when the child wakes up in the morning the worry is gone!

You and the children can decorate a jar or plastic pot (depending on your creativity you could make it look like one of their favorite cartoon characters!) You can just call it the worry pot and tell the children that the ‘worry friend’ comes and eats them in the night. You can say that there are lots of worried children at moment which is why you have a pot rather than the actual friend as they are busy taking all the children’s worries away.

You must remember to take the worries out every night, but as well as reassuring for the children it will also alert you to what they are actually worried about and then you can be working out how to support them.

Taking part in an activity together builds connectedness within your family group which we know is extremely important in making us feel safe and helping us build resilience to the difficult times we are in.

A great way to do this is to talk about feelings that may have triggered the fight, flight or freeze response. At the end of the factsheet is an image of a gingerbread person. Just copy the drawing for several household members. Have one for you, and one for however many children you have - this is an exercise the whole family can do.

* Have pens and felt tips.
* Ask everyone to imagine they are in a wood and walking along a beautiful path when suddenly they go around a corner and come face to face with a big grizzly bear!
* Using the materials on the table and the gingerbread person, ask them to draw or write on the gingerbread person what they are feeling in their body when they see the bear.

Remembered the diagram on page **4** that explains what is happening in the body you can use this to help your children understand why their body is responding in the way it is when they are frightened.

**An activity to promote emotional safety with your children**

Ask your children to think about if they have a special place where you are living. Do they have a room of their own or a favorite space in the communal room, do they like to be in the garden if the weather's ok, or the garden shed? Get them to tell you why they like it and if it makes them feel safe, is it because its private or with people? Do they have toys there or things to cuddle, is it sunny and warm, is it where they have their snacks and feel comfortable? If they don’t identify anywhere ask them if they would like to make a special safe space. You can have a conversation about why it is safe, how you can keep it safe and what it means if they go there during the day.

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It can be useful for you to identify and share with your child your safe place while having this discussion. For you it might be a bedroom, the bath, anywhere where you feel you can have some peace, and time to you and it is where you feel safe. Talk to your child about why this space is important to each of you and how it makes you feel safe. Discuss with your child whether going to this safe space means you want to be alone or is going to the space a sign that you need a cuddle and some reassurance. If they are not able to identify a safe space, by telling them about what yours is like and why you need it, this can help them think about where their safe space might be.

Remember you are not superhuman - the situation you find yourself in could never have been predicted or anticipated. The world is struggling to know how to respond so it’s hardly surprising individuals are struggling as well.

A drawing of a hand

Description automatically generated with low confidenceBe kind to yourself!

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