Fact Sheet Five:
Understanding Emotions and Healthy Relationships

Developing a way of communicating the traumatic experience

**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.

l difficult or avoid it, are unable to concentrate in class, become naughty, play truant and others

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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.

Factsheet five is designed to provide you with some information on emotions and healthy relationships. There is no doubt that during this really difficult time relationships within our families can become strained. This can lead to some emotionally explosive outbursts at home as children attempt to work through their sadness, anger, and frustration at the situation. This is normal and your child’s way of trying to communicate how these complex emotions are making them feel. This may also be the only way they can find to express their feelings about the traumatic experiences they have been through.

We know from the evidence that developing a way of communicating the traumatic experience can be beneficial in enabling those that have had to escape from war to settle and recover from the trauma they have experienced.

However, just enabling someone to talk about what has happened can just keep the trauma feeling as though it’s just happening and can be extremely triggering so it’s about finding a way to acknowledge your own and your children’s pain without it become an overwhelming focus.

Most of what you and your children are experiencing will be normal responses to abnormal situations. Understanding that and finding ways to manage the regulation of emotions (grounding, relaxation) and then recognizing and developing resilience, staying connected and nurturing each other, are all opportunities when you can acknowledge and be sad about what has happened.

You may all feel a sense of grief and loss - again an absolutely reasonable response to what you have experienced. You may still be hearing regularly from friends and relatives who are still in Ukraine experiencing terror on a daily basis or seeing images in the TV. This can leave a sense of ‘survivor guilt’. While this may not be rational (thank goodness you did survive) we do know it is a recognised response to trauma and surviving situations where others may not.

It is good to accept and allow the feelings that surface. Take time to process the guilt, grief, fear, and loss that accompany a traumatic event and the loss of life.

As we have already discussed in a previous factsheet, connecting to others can help.

Try and share your feelings with others. This may be where, if there is a local community group supporting those from Ukraine, it might be good to go as others there will be experiencing the same as you.

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It is recognised that using mindfulness techniques also help, especially during flashbacks or periods of intense and painful emotions, and we have already looked at how grounding techniques can be useful when this happens.

**Practice self-care**

Experiencing an event involving loss or potential loss of life is frightening and overwhelming. Survivors can benefit from doing activities that feel good, such as: we have looked in other factsheets about self-care exercises and also the elements that contribute to good self-care such as:

* Get enough sleep
* Eat a balanced diet
* Exercise regularly

The evidence also suggests that doing something good for others can help us in alleviating the symptoms of survivor guilt.

You may find offering time to educate people about your experience might be useful or lending support to those newly arrived in the UK.

Grief and loss can follow different stages and can be applied to the loss when we are bereaved but also to the losses you have experienced because of the war.

All of the below are recognised stages and emotions as a result of grief:

* **Denial** - this can include avoidance, confusion, excitement, shock, fear
* **Anger** - this can include frustration, irritability, anxiety
* **Bargaining** - struggle to find meaning or help others wanting to tell own story
* **Depression** – helplessness hostility avoidance
* **Acceptance** – exploring opportunities, introducing new plans, moving froward

It is not difficult to see how some of what you and your children are feeling are normal reactions to grief and loss.

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We have taken this theoretical model by Elisabeth Kubler – Ross and looked at how it might specifically impact following escaping a war.

You may actually not have experienced these emotions until you arrived in the UK - being fearful and trying to negotiate and escape from the war, you may have been mostly in denial and the flight or fight survival mode. You have lived through an unbelievable experience, so what we would recognise as the denial stage with emotions of avoidance, confusion, shock, and fear are likely to have been the main emotions until you arrived in the UK.

You may not have begun to experience the emotions we would connect to the anger stage until you had arrived and settled a little in the UK. Feelings of frustration, irritability, anxiety can feel inappropriate when you are, in theory, somewhere safe and can cause confusion when you may feel lucky to have arrived and maybe feel you should be grateful you are here. Yet despite this you find that you are overwhelmed by difficult emotions. Feeling angry about what you have experienced is normal and giving yourself opportunity to talk about this with a supportive adult will help. Your children may be experiencing the same and need to be able to share this with someone – they may need to share it with a safe adult that is not you. This may be because they fear upsetting you or making you angry or other reasons. It is a reasonable request and supporting them to talk to a neutral person may be the best way to help them.

The next stage of grief is known as the **Bargaining** stage – this is where you can find it difficult to find meaning in anything or unable to help others or you may want to tell your own story.

Again, at a time when you might be putting pressure on yourself to move forward you may be finding it hard to make sense of anything and feel stuck thinking about what has happened, how it might have been different, what you could have done differently etc. This is a normal stage of grief and finding someone safe to tell your individual story to might be important and helpful at this time as a way of trying to make some sense of it.

Another stage of grief is **Depression** – at this stage you may feel helpless, hostile towards others and want to avoid contact with others. Recognizing that this is a stage of grief can be helpful in understanding that this is a normal reaction, and these are emotions shared by many that experience loss.

The final stage of grief is **Acceptance** – at this point people begin to explore new opportunities, make new plans, and move forward. This stage may be extremely difficult if you are hoping to go back to Ukraine. At the time of writing this factsheet, there is no sign of the war ending and so plans to return safely home are probably not feasible. Some of you may decide that you want to stay here and the process of application to remain may be part of the acceptance stage.

As a word of warning, these stages do not follow a simple progression as described here but we can move to and from the stages until we finally get to the acceptance stage.

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**Be Kind to Yourself**

The impact of trauma can be huge on us psychologically and it is sometimes only when we are physically safe (away from the war) that the emotional consequences begin to show themselves.

There is the physical response from our body trying to protect us, (flight or fight) the survivor’s guilt, grief, and loss and all the practical issues of coming to terms with adjusting to life in a new country.

All of your responses will be individual and the information in these factsheets covers general responses to trauma. If you are worried that you or children are experiencing reactions that need more professional help, please make sure you seek it.

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And finally, an exercise to help us identify and share our emotions.

**The Iceberg Exercise**

Living together following traumatic experiences can put a strain on our relationships and lead us to behave in ways we might not usually. This ‘iceberg’ exercise can help us to see that these behaviours are usually driven by underlying feelings like being scared or frustrated.

Ask anyone in the family that wants to join in to draw an iceberg and put their name on the paper.

Start with each person writing on the top/ visible section of the iceberg their ways of behaving in the family, e.g., stays in room, shouts, wants lots of cuddles, needs to be close to everyone, cries etc. Pass the sheets to each other and family members add any behaviours they have observed but not written down.

Then get each person to complete the hidden/ underneath part of the iceberg to identify what emotion/ thoughts might be prompting the behaviour: e.g. I’m scared, feel unsafe, is the family safe, I’m lonely, I don’t feel understood, I’m worried about the future, I’m going to fail at school/ work, what will happen if I get ill?

It's time as a family or parent to talk through some of these worries and acknowledge that this is a very difficult time, and all these worries and emotions are normal.

**Good luck with the future.**

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