

Supporting children to stay strong following Grenfell - one year on

Preparing for Anniversary reactions



As we approach the date that marks one year on from the devastating Grenfell Tower tragedy, children will be very strongly reminded of their reaction to the fire and how they felt at the time. **How can adults help children understand more about how they might feel or react to the anniversary period?** The information below has been compiled by drawing on our experiences of supporting children through tragic and frightening events and by drawing on relevant literature and research in this area¹. There is also a list of contact details for organisations that can help at the end for further information.

What is an ‘anniversary reaction’?

It’s natural and very common to have a negative reaction to a traumatic anniversary. This is known as an ‘anniversary reaction’. No matter how well children may have been trying to put memories of the fire away and only think about them when they choose to, the anniversary will be a powerful reminder.

Research tells us that the greatest distress and highest levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms can occur during the month in which the trauma took place. It’s important to note that not everyone will experience an anniversary reaction, however, knowing what to expect in advance may be helpful.

Why does an ‘anniversary reaction’ happen?

A reaction to the anniversary signals that we are still working on moving through the trauma of the experience. It is a normal part of the grieving process. The brain pulls us back into old thought patterns that elicit painful emotions.

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Even if we have a sense of starting to manage and cope better, (in spite of the constant distressing visual reminder represented by the Tower) we could begin to experience strange symptoms days or weeks before or after the anniversary and not know what is happening to us. This could threaten to undo any feelings of being able to move on and so it's important for us to understand how our minds and bodies are reacting.

What sort of reactions can we expect?

The most common reaction one year on from a major trauma is a repeat of the feelings, bodily responses and thoughts that occurred at the time of the event.

For the local community affected by the tragedy, the period of time around the anniversary is likely to bring up even stronger memories of the extraordinary fear and pain that they suffered: remembering feelings of helplessness, despair, shock and anger, and experiencing renewed emotional and physical distress. There could be intense frustration relating to, for example, still being in temporary accommodation, and the effect of this on feelings of recovery.

There could be lots of possible triggers around the anniversary period, for example, the start of Ramadan (date to be confirmed but possibly 14-16 May), the Public Inquiry (21st May), and of course the anniversary date itself.

The memories might become so intense and vivid that it can be difficult to sleep or concentrate. Some people might feel nervous and on edge, or become more irritable and jumpy. Others might feel they have to be more on their guard to protect their loved ones from further distress.

How might my child react?

Children's reactions will vary from individual to individual. They could react in very unexpected ways on the anniversary date. They might expect to feel sad but instead feel angry and frustrated. They might be surprised that they don't feel any emotion at all, and might feel guilty as a result.

Children might experience feelings of fear and anxiety, or grief as they are reminded of their possessions, homes or classmate and loved ones they have lost.

Children could experience the return of extreme emotional reactions. This could include feeling helpless, frightened, experiencing disturbed sleep, bedwetting, nightmares and not wanting to spend time apart from family members. They might find it hard to sleep, and concentrating on learning might be especially difficult.

Our bodies can remember trauma as well as the brain so there may be an increased chance of your child experiencing some sort of physical illness over the anniversary period.

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Children may want to avoid events, places, situations or people connected to the Grenfell tragedy, as the feelings triggered by the anniversary may feel overwhelming for them. Some children may need as much time, patience, understanding and emotional support to cope during this period as they did during the immediate aftermath of the fire.

What can adults do to help?

'Our task is to try to inspire children's resiliency and hope, and help them recover their wholeness'¹

It can be helpful to prepare and plan ahead as much as possible. Find time to talk about the approaching anniversary with children – talking about what might happen and how they might feel can help to release some of the anxiety and pressure surrounding it.

"When something terrible happens, like the Grenfell fire, our brain and body holds on to the memory of what happened and how we felt at the time.

Sometimes you might notice that the memories might not be so strong, or so upsetting. But at other times something will remind our brain and body of what happened – it could be something small like a smell, a noise, a picture or even the word 'Grenfell' – and the painful memories will become really strong all over again. It might feel like a big wave crashing over you.

This is also much more likely to happen on dates connected with the fire – such as the one year anniversary on 14th June. Lots of people will be getting worried about how they might feel. Even if you have been able to not think so much about the fire, when we get near to the date, you might not know what is happening to your feelings.

You might feel really angry and upset, or worried and frightened. You might feel numb and not feel anything at all. All these feelings are normal feelings one year on from a terrible disaster. It's important to understand that these feelings won't last for ever – it will be a tough time but you will probably start to feel better a week or two after the date."

Be honest with your child. Children will notice that you and other trusted adults in their lives are more upset than usual over this period. It's okay to share some of your own reactions and worries. Reassure them that the period around the anniversary could be a difficult time to get

¹ James Gordon Centre for Mind-Body Medicine (2011)

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through but that you, and they, will be okay. Share your own feelings to help them to label and name their own. Children learn from watching their parents and this can help them to show and share their own emotions.

Be aware that there will be lots of distressing imagery shown again on TV, the internet and social media. Try to limit your child's exposure to distressing scenes as this may heighten their anxiety and distress. Look for websites or news programmes that present images and news in an age appropriate way² and encourage children to ask questions and discuss what they have seen and heard.

Help children learn healthy and positive ways to express themselves and their feelings through dance, exercise, sport, play, music, art, writing etc.

Let children acknowledge the date in their own way. Some children may show interest while others may choose to try to ignore the anniversary. Don't force children to participate in ceremonies or memorials, or overload them with information. Take your cue from your child. There is no one right reaction.

Rituals and activities that could be helpful:

Some people find that planning rituals can help – this is simply a routine that you repeat to mark an anniversary. If your child is interested, find out whether there are events that are taking place in the local community to commemorate the event with other children and community members (such as a religious or spiritual ceremony). This can be a helpful way to strengthen coping skills with supportive community members.

Other rituals your child might find helpful could include:

- *Listening to a certain song*
- *Watching a movie that makes them laugh or cry*
- *Getting together with friends for a shared activity such as cooking, running, cycling, knitting, singing, dancing, yoga*
- *Visiting a place that reminds them of their life before the tragedy*
- *Calling someone who helped them after the tragedy*
- *Planting flowers or a tree*
- *Visiting someone who helped care for them immediately following the tragedy*

Try to help children to think about the extraordinary challenges they (and you) have overcome this past year. Find ways to let children know things that you have noticed and appreciated, for example, their courage, kindness, humour, helpfulness etc.

² E.g. Newsround, CBBC and First News

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Try to help children to find ways to replace some of their bad memories (such as drawing on paper then crossing it out). It could take a long time for them to recover their full resilience, but eventually they will start to be able to make the memories smaller (for example, by trying to remember from a distance as if watching from behind a screen), and make choices about which parts of the memories they hold onto. Ask children if they can tell you about a strength they have developed since the tragedy, or if they can recall something/someone or an act of kindness that has really helped them this year. This will help them to start to let go of some of the more painful and distressing details.

Remind children that this difficult time is almost always temporary. They are likely to feel better within a week or two and symptoms will fade away on their own – knowing there is light at the end can make the tunnel seem less frightening. If you or your child are still experiencing significant emotional distress, you can seek professional help (see contacts below).

‘Even terrible things can teach some good things - like understanding, caring, courage...and how to be okay during difficult times’³

Useful Resources for Children:

‘Relax by Catherine O’Neill’ (Child’s Play). This book helps us to recognise the causes and symptoms of stress in children’s lives, and teaches children how to deal with them using simple and enjoyable exercises.

‘When Something Terrible Happens’ by Marge Heegaard (Woodland Press). An art activity book for children aged 6 – 12 years - creating ways for children to explore the fright, confusion and insecurity caused by traumatic events.

‘Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine’ by Winston’s Wish. An activity book offering invaluable practical and sensitive support for bereaved younger children.

‘Things That Can Help’ compiled by the Triborough EPCS. A resource book of activities that promote calming, self-efficacy and connectedness to help to manage stress for children aged 5 – 16 years. Please ask your link EP if you would like additional copies.

Contacts:

Schools: Each school has a link Educational Psychologist as well as a link CAMHS worker who are providing targeted support to all affected schools. Senior contact for the EP services is Helen.kerslake@rbkc.gov.uk and the CAMHS manager is David.bailey4@nhs.net.

NHS response: A dedicated NHS response service number where you can get access to mental health support services as well as information and advice 24 hours a day 7 days a

³ Marge Heegaard (1991) When something terrible happens (Woodland Press)

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week 0800 0234 650 or email cnw-tr.spa@nhs.net. NHS run a walk in service at the Curve Community Centre, 4 Bard Road, W10 6TP from Monday to Friday, 10am to 8pm and Saturday to Sunday, 11am to 6pm to help people that want to talk to someone about mental health support.

How can Winston's Wish, The Childhood Bereavement Network and other organisations help?

The Childhood Bereavement Network website has a directory of local open access services (www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/directory) which support children and young people who have been bereaved. In addition, the following organisations have a national remit to support those helping children and young people affected by death and bereavement.

Winston's Wish

Guidance, support and information for anyone caring for a bereaved child. Winston's Wish also offers particular support to those bereaved through murder or manslaughter

Head Office, 17 Royal Crescent, Cheltenham, UK, GL50 3DA. Freephone Helpline: 08088 020 021 – open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Enquiries: +44 (0) 1242 515157 Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

Guidance, support and information for anyone caring for a bereaved child

Helpline: 0800 02 888 40 – open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Email: info@childbereavement.org.uk

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Cruse

Support for the bereaved, including a network of local groups

0844 477 9400 – open Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5pm

Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

www.cruse.org.uk

Child Death Helpline

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Helpline for anyone affected by the death of a child of any age

0800 282 986

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

Support for bereaved parents who have experienced the death of a child of any age and from any cause.

Phone: 0845 123 2304

E-mail: info@tcf.org.uk

www.tcf.org.uk

Child Line

Helpline for children to talk about anything that worries them 0800 1111 24 hours a day every day

www.childline.org.uk

ⁱ With reference to the following:

- i) Anniversary Reactions: Research Findings Hamblen, Friedman and Schnurr Feb 2016
- ii) Coping with Trauma Anniversaries 12 Keys January 2017
- iii) National Center for Child Traumatic Stress & Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health Tips for Families 2003
- iv) Mastering the Anniversary Reaction: Putting Memory to Rest. Matthew Erlich and Lloyd Sederer 2011
- v) 5 ways to deal with Anniversary Reactions. Ellen Hendriksen Boston University's Centre for Anxiety and Related Disorders. Sept 2016
- vi) Haiti Earthquake Anniversary Reactions. James Gordon. Center for Mind-Body Medicine. January 2011