

After the event

Supporting children after a frightening event

This leaflet is designed to help adults to understand how children and young people might react to frightening events, and to give some ideas of what might help. Further copies are available from www.traumaticstress.org.uk

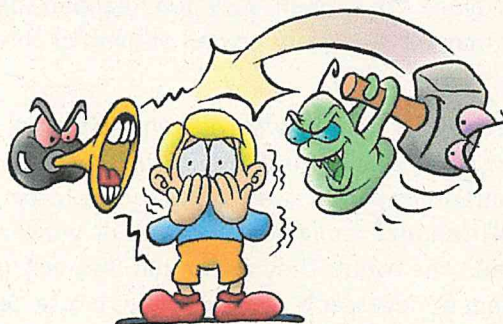
Reactions after a frightening event

Children and young people sometimes witness or are involved in things that they find very scary or stressful such as accidents, violence or terrorist attacks. As they try to understand what happened and "get their heads around it", the following reactions are common:

- Nightmares
- Memories or pictures of the event unexpectedly popping into the mind
- Feeling as if it is actually happening again
- Playing or drawing about the event time and time again
- Not wanting to think or talk about the event
- Avoiding anything that might remind them of the event
- Getting angry or upset more easily
- Not being able to concentrate
- Not being able to sleep
- Being more jumpy and being on the look out for danger
- Becoming more clingy with parents or carers
- Physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches
- Temporarily losing abilities (e.g. feeding and toileting)
- Problems at school

It's quite normal to be upset, even for quite a while *after* a frightening event; children and young people (and adults) may feel angry, sad, guilty, confused, or any combination of feelings. Some people continue to feel scared, even though the danger has passed. Children and young people worry less if you can help them to see that their reactions are normal and understandable.

Memories of frightening events often start out as pictures and sounds that pop into people's heads when they don't want them to.



The memories may bring with them all the fear and distress that came with the original event.

What can be done to help?

Try and make things as normal as possible

Everyone feels safer when they know what to expect. A frightening event often makes people unsure of what's coming. You can help children and young people feel safer sooner, by sticking to their normal routines as much as possible, and continuing with their normal activities when possible.

Help children and young people to understand what happened

Children and young people need a truthful explanation that makes sense of the main facts, which is appropriate for their age. Even younger children can really benefit from being given a description and explanation of what happened.

Having an understanding of what happened helps in many ways:

- It helps the child to make sense of the upsetting event and to reduce some of the unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness.
- Talking through the events can help to correct misunderstandings. For example, some children may think that it was their fault; others are confused about important

progressive muscle relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.

Relaxation Script for Younger Children

Hands & Arms

Pretend you are squeezing a whole lemon in your left hand. Squeeze it hard. Try to squeeze all the juice out. Feel the tightness in your hand and arm as you squeeze. Now drop the lemon and relax. See how much better your hand and arm feel when they are relaxed. Repeat with other hand.

Arms and Shoulders

Pretend you are a furry, lazy cat. You want to stretch. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Raise them up high over your head. Way back. Feel the pull in your shoulders. Stretch higher. Now just let your arms drop back to your side. Okay kitten, stretch again. Repeat.

Shoulder and Neck

Now pretend you are a turtle. You're sitting out on a rock by a nice, peaceful pond, just relaxing in the warm sun. It feels nice and warm and safe here. Oh-Oh! You sense danger. Pull your head into your house. Try to pull your shoulders up to your ears and push your head down into your shoulders. Hold in tight. It isn't easy to be a turtle in a shell. The danger is past now. You can come out into the warm sunshine and once again you can relax and feel the warm sunshine. Watch out now. More danger. Hurry pull your head back into your house and hold it tight. Repeat.

Jaw

You have a giant jawbreaker bubble gum in your mouth. It's very hard to chew. Bite down on it. Hard! Let your neck muscles help you. Now relax. Just let your jaw hang loose. Notice how good it feels just to let your jaw drop. Okay, let's tackle that jawbreaker again now. Repeat.

Face and Nose

Here comes a pesky old fly. He has landed on your nose. Try to get him off without using your hands. That's right, wrinkle up your nose. Make as many wrinkles in your nose as you can. Scrunch your nose up real hard. Good. You've chased him away. Now you can relax your nose. Oops here he comes back again. Repeat.

Stomach

Hey! Here comes a cute baby elephant. But he's not watching where he's going. He doesn't see you lying there in the grass, and he's about to step on your stomach. Don't move. You don't have time to get out of the way. Just get ready for him. Make your stomach very hard. Tighten up your stomach muscles real tight. Hold it. It looks like he is going the other way. You can relax now. Let your stomach go soft. Let it be as relaxed as you can. That feels so much better. Oops, he's coming this way again. Get ready. Repeat.

Legs and Feet

Now pretend that you are standing barefoot in a big, fat mud puddle. Squish your toes down deep in to the mud. Try to get your feet down to the bottom of the mud puddle. Push down, spread your toes apart, and feel the mud squish up between your toes. Now step out of the mud puddle. Relax your feet. Let your toes go loose and feel how nice that is. It feels good to be relaxed. Repeat...

References: Carkhuff, R.R. Helping and human relations, Vol. 1, New York: Holt, Rivehart & Winston, 1969.

Leaves on a Stream

mindfulness exercise

Overview

During the **leaves on a stream** exercise, you will visualize yourself resting near a stream. Whenever thoughts enter your mind, you will imagine placing them atop a leaf, and watching as they float away. Instead of seeing the world from “inside” your thoughts, you will take a step back and view them from afar. By doing so, you will gain perspective on your thoughts and feelings, reducing their power.

Getting Started

Find a quiet place, free of distractions.

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.

Close your eyes or let your gaze soften.

Begin taking slow, deep breaths.

Instructions

Visualize

Imagine you are resting by the side of a stream. This scene can look however you like. Use all your senses to imagine what the stream and its surroundings look like, the sound of the water and other ambiance, the physical sensations, and anything else that comes to mind.

Meditate

Your objective during this exercise is simply to focus on the stream. When distractions enter your mind, such as thoughts or feelings, take a moment to notice them without judgment. For example, if you are distracted by other obligations, notice and acknowledge to yourself: “I am thinking about my to-do list.”

Manage Your Thoughts

After taking a moment to observe a thought or feeling, return your attention to the stream. Place your thought upon a leaf. You might imagine writing the thought on the leaf or attaching it in some other way. Place the leaf in the water and watch it float down the stream until it disappears.

Practice

Continue visualizing the stream, simply observing and releasing any thoughts that enter your mind. There is nothing else you need to do. You may set a timer for 10-15 minutes to know when practice concludes.

Notes

- Treat all of your thoughts and feelings the same, whether comfortable, uncomfortable, or neutral. The goal is to become aware of your experience—not to change or improve it.
- With regular practice, the leaves on a stream exercise will become easier, and its positive effects more powerful.