

Guide to working with young people with post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety during Coronavirus

We never quite know what is happening for our young people as their ability to express their feelings and worries is a lot harder to verbalise than what it may well be for an adult. So it is important that we take measure to reassure and calm the young person nervous system and open up a dialogue around their worry and fears so support can be provided. Foster carers are at the heart and now currently the main person to provide this emotional support. Below therefore are some ideas that we hope will help you to connect with the young person on an emotional level and reduce any anxieties/fears that the young person may have.

Breathing exercises:

Breathing exercises and meditation is one of the best ways to calm the nervous system down so it would be great to start off the day with a routine that involves a breathing exercise.

Planning for the day ahead can be helpful and with all of this guidance it is important to go with what the young person can manage and be attentive to signs that this help is not creating the desired effect that we hoped.

1. Breathing exercises – this can be anytime of the day – it may be best to start in the morning

Start and end your session with 3 deep breaths

Do this together so you can mirror the work. Focus on a long belly breath inhalation over a count of 1..2..3..4, put your hand on your belly to feel it rise, followed by an open mouthed exhale 1..2..3..4. For some young people suffering from anxiety, breath work can cause them to hyperventilate/overcome with anxieties and tightness in the chest so be sure to **start by feeling your feet on the floor, stamp a couple of times**. Give an example of an outbreath and imagine you want to gently blow out a candle. This creates an extended breath.

2. Coming back into the body

a. If at any point during the session/call the young person appears agitated or triggered in any way, pause the conversation. Take it in turns with the young person to name something you can both see, something you can hear, something you can touch, something you can smell & something you can taste – place their mind on the here and now.

Anxiety takes us out of our body and one of the ways to help support someone and calm their system down is to find ways to bring them back into their bodies. Activating the senses is a simple way back. Do not speed through this, take your time. You may just focus on one of the senses or slowly move through all five. This is also about strengthening your relationship with the young person – so even if the idea is only discussed it is a start.

b. Stamp the feet and ask the young person to gently tap their thighs. Explore the edges of the feet on the floor rolling the foot around and explore speed of stamping. This again helps to ground and calm the system.

3. Mindfulness - Anxiety & Sleep

What we know about mindfulness & meditation is the incredible benefit it can bring to anxious and distressed systems. Research has shown that breath work over 10-20 minutes a day can have a significant impact on our autonomic nervous system. This is part of the nervous system that gets triggered and helps us survive trauma. In PTSD that part of the brain remains activated long after a person is 'safe' and our work is to help communicate to the brain that it is now safe and it can relax and return to a more balanced state (more info about trauma and the brain below).

We need to try and gather as much information from the young person so instead of asking "how are you?" use "How did you sleep last night".. "How has your morning been?" and when going to bed ask "What can you do tonight to feel safe and calm?" The aim is to bring our inquiry into as much of the 'here and now' as we can. So again, as an example if a young person becomes agitated ask them "are you safe right now in this moment?"

Many of the young people already have soothing strategies in place (sometimes they just aren't conscious of the tools they already use) so rather than teach meditation (but please do explore short exercises if you want to) try and find out what activity they do in the day that helps them feel calm and encourage an exploration of that. This discussion raises their own awareness and consciousness of their coping mechanisms and also encourages curiosity around what works and what doesn't. Mindfulness presents itself in many ways, playing an instrument, sport, prayer, a walk, listening to music, breath work, dancing, martial arts... they all have the possibility of calming the autonomic nervous system.

If a young person is finding it difficult to sleep, moving an activity they normally do that calms them closer to bedtime may help. It could also be helpful to try some grounding exercises before bed. You could explore the following exercise: ask them to sit down on the floor with their back against the wall (preferable as it's stronger) or in a chair feeling their back against the chair. Focus on long inhales and exhales and feel the safety of the wall or the back of the chair. Bring their attention to the floor and wall and encourage them to sink in, "the floor and wall aren't going anywhere... they can take your weight and right now in this moment you are safe and you're being held". You can also add a bear hug here – this is where they hug themselves. The lack of physical contact and touch has a huge impact on a person's sense of wellbeing so introducing a self administered hug could offer a level of soothing.

4. Self Care

These are just a few ideas/exercises offered to complement & support the work you're already doing, shifting from the 'real' world to the 'online' world potentially raises anxiety for everyone, particularly when working with vulnerable communities. I hope

some of these very straightforward and simple ideas help support the relationship to the young person/people you care for.

I would also like to encourage you to include self care in your day as a foster carer. As foster carers we often end up holding other people's shock and trauma so please make some space to look after yourself.

It might be a good idea to create a ritual for yourself to mark the beginning and end of your working day so you have clear boundaries in place within your home.

- a. Start and end your day with a breath sequence or quietly sit in silence before you open your laptop.
- b. If you don't have the space for an office or designated work space then creating one by simply putting a throw on your work chair during hours and removing it when you end your day allows you to contain your work space.

5. Some information on Trauma and the Brain:

a. For some of the young people we support sharing information about the brain can offer a level of clarity and safety. How the brain works to help you survive trauma and how it can sometimes get 'stuck' in survival mode helps the young person understand how their body is working. This helps them understand how PTSD and anxiety can present and why they may find it hard to retain information, have difficulties sleeping, have emotional outbursts, find it difficult to sustain relationships, feel vacant, lethargic or 'dead' inside, lose voice modulation and facial muscle control. Exploring this can help a young person understand that what's happening in their body makes sense and our job together is to help the brain get back 'online'. To share this information with young people we use Dan Siegel's Hand/Brain model. There 2 videos link below on this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0T_2NN0C68

b. I wouldn't share the information below in this way with young people but for those of you who are interested I have included a simple description to help you understand the impact of the work we are all striving to do to support our community of young people and their health.

In very simple terms the autonomic nervous system is made up of two branches, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). They are both always active but one is normally dominant.

The effects of SNS are most apparent under conditions of extreme stress, excitement or fear and are classically referred to as the 'fight or flight' response. This system is vital to health but chronic SNS activation can leave the body exhausted and depleted, it is flooding the system when a person experiences trauma and if it doesn't come back into balance can cause PTSD and anxiety (among many other psychological and physiological presentations). The PNS acts as a counterbalance to the SNS; it is dominant when we are resting, sleeping and calm. In a healthy human being the PNS is the default with the SNS activating and deactivating when needed.

The stress created in the body by an overactive SNS can lead to many health issues and it is our collective job to bring these young people's brains and bodies back into balance. The good news is, many of the activities we are involved in help activate the PNS and in turn creates more balance and wellbeing. This occurs through building healthy trusting relationships, engaging with community based activities, fresh air, creativity, music, dance, meditation, prayer, reflective, calm, safe spaces.

Young Person's Well Being Health Checklist: (can be worker led)

1. What are you eating and drinking today to make you feel good?
2. If you're on medication check you have enough and note down when you need to call your GP for a repeat prescription.
3. What study can you do today?
4. Is your bedroom tidy and do you have space free to work and relax?
5. How was your sleep last night?
6. What friends are you going to contact today?
7. Where will you go for your one hour of outdoor exercise today? Please be mindful that any activity outside needs to be safe.
8. What exercise can you do in your home?
9. How much time did you spend online yesterday? Would you rather do more or less today?
10. Have you felt anxious today and what did you do to help feel calm and safe? Did it work?

Below is more information about the virus and foster carers can share what they believe will be helpful to the young person – if they are going outside and putting themselves and the foster home in danger than providing more detail and the seriousness of the virus may need to be increased so the young person fully understands it.

What is Coronavirus? It's called a Coronavirus because "corona" means "crown" in Latin and the virus looks like it's wearing a spiky crown. Mostly, it makes people cough, feel tired and have a fever. But older people and people who have other conditions can get very sick from it. The disease the virus causes is called COVID-19.

Where did it come from? The virus was first found in a city in China, called Wuhan, last December. But we think the virus actually comes from bats. From there, it hopped into another type of animal, who gave it to humans. No one knows for sure what this mystery animal was, but some people think it might have been a pangolin, a scaly animal that eats ants.

How does the virus get into cells in the body? The virus enters cells using a special "door" on the outside of human cells. The new coronavirus also needs a "key" to get into cells. In this case, the coronavirus has a special "spike" on its surface that it uses as a key to open the door. Once inside cells, the virus makes lots of copies of itself. Those copies break out of cells, then infect other cells. At a certain point, there are so many virus particles being produced that our normal cells can't work properly ... and we get sick.

How does it make people sick? Viruses make people sick by killing human cells or making them not work properly. Like we said, the new coronavirus uses a special door to get into cells. Those special doorways are on cells in the nose and lungs. If the virus grows too much in the lungs, it can make it hard to breathe. That is called pneumonia. Luckily, your body has an army to fight germs like the coronavirus. It's called the immune system. When a virus enters

your body, the immune system attacks the virus. You know how you can get a fever, headache or runny nose when you're sick? That's caused by the immune system, and it's good! These yucky symptoms are signs that your body is fighting the virus. Most people who get COVID-19 just have symptoms like a cough, fever or runny nose. Doctors are not sure why, but some people get really sick. Some peoples' immune systems may not fight hard enough. Other peoples' immune systems may fight too hard, hurting their own cells. Both of these things can make people sicker.

How will I know if I get it? There's a special test to see if you have COVID-19. If you feel sick, tell your foster carer, social worker or an adult you trust. They will support you to call your doctor to see if you need the test. It's just like a flu test; they stick a Q-tip up your nose and test your snot for the virus. The results come back a day later.

What can I do to help? You can help stop the virus by washing your hands. Use soap and rub your hands together to clean all your fingers, under the fingernails and between the fingers. You should wash them for 20 seconds. Also, try to keep your hands off your face, so no rubbing your eyes or nose or putting your hands in your mouth. That way, if there is any of the virus on your hands, you won't give it a way to enter the body where it can make you sick. And remember to cough or sneeze into your elbow, and stay home when you're sick.

Should I be worried? There's no need for you to worry, because professionals are working very hard to keep us all safe. Even if you do get this virus, young people usually don't get very sick from it. It's more like a mild cold.

But you still have a special role to play in protecting others! Elders and vulnerable people with pre-existing health conditions need your help to stay healthy. That means washing your hands and staying home if you're sick. It also means skipping your activities & not going to college if your teachers decide that's best. That can slow down the spread of the virus and protect older and sicker people

When will this end? We don't know for sure. But using math, we can make educated guesses. Left on its own, the virus would take many months to spread all around the world. But that doesn't mean your city would be affected for that long. And a vaccine could stop the virus sooner — if scientists can create one.

Some scientists think that the virus will go away when the weather gets warm. That's what happens with other coronaviruses and the flu. Lots of viruses like cold, dry air. But we don't know if that is true for this new virus.

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Things to do:

ESOL - Online English Classes for Free

<https://www.esolcourses.com/content/topicsmenu/beginners.html>

Chatterpack - Games, Learning, Online Museum Tours & Creative ideas

<https://chatterpack.net/blogs/blog/list-of-online-resources-for-anyone-who-is-isolated-at->

[home?fbclid=IwAR0WdgpJfIaCIkFEgYLW8Vw7b4Fi8Xb9FRAS22ODjAhHlGdleJmuc0DuHo0](https://www.facebook.com/lwAR0WdgpJfIaCIkFEgYLW8Vw7b4Fi8Xb9FRAS22ODjAhHlGdleJmuc0DuHo0)

Helpline Services Available:

YoungMinds Crisis Messenger

Provides free, 24/7 crisis support across the UK
If you need urgent help **text YM to 85258**

Childline

Comforts, advises and protects children and young people 24 hours a day

Phone 0800 1111

Chat online

<https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat/>

The Mix

Information, support & listening for people under 25

Phone 0808 808 4994

Chat online

<https://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team>

Samaritans

24 hour confidential listening and support for anyone who needs it.

Phone 116 123

Taken from www.youngminds.org.uk adapted for Sunbeam Fostering Group – Head of Fostering.