

Minimising the effects of traumatic incidents on school staff.

Fortunately, highly traumatic events are not a common occurrence. But, when they do happen they can have devastating and long-term consequences for those affected. School staff are particularly vulnerable, working in stressful conditions and being exposed to a wide variety of potential sources of trauma in the school community beyond their own personal lives. It's therefore critical that schools have done the necessary contingency planning and have sufficient support in place to deal with the psychological and social repercussions of a traumatic incident, for both pupils and staff.

Boards and school leadership should review and discuss the following points to maximise their preparedness and minimise the impact of any such event in their school community:

Contingency planning

Too often not enough time is devoted to low likelihood, high impact risks the school is exposed to. Governors and SLT should devote sufficient time and attention to ensuring their risk register takes into account psychosocial risks and how they will be managed and mitigated should they become a reality. Bereavement (staff or pupil), suicide, terror attack – the probability and level of impact of these incidents will vary but policies and procedures should be in place, rehearsed and communicated to all those who may be involved. These are often not pleasant topics of discussion and some risks may seem incredibly outlandish. But by talking through plans and capabilities in sufficient detail, schools can identify where they need more resourcing and be more able to act proactively if and when required.

Ensure the school has adequate insurance

This should be obvious, but there may be a temptation under budgetary pressure to purchase insurance that fails to cover all eventualities and/or for the necessary amount. Any risk management review should include a comparison of the school's insurance needs versus actual current cover. It should also determine what provision there is for dealing with the likely fallout from traumatic events – staff cover, staff and pupil counselling, even legal liability. Having this in place will give piece of mind to the board, SLT and staff that the stress of financial repercussions will not be added to consequences of these events.

Create a mentally healthy school

Resilience is key to managing and recovering from emotional trauma. A school that has a well-established, whole-school culture of positive mental health and wellbeing will be much more able to cope with a traumatic incident. Addressing resilience and the mental health needs cannot happen after the fact and schools must invest in this aspect of their environment proactively.

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Build and know your support networks

In a similar vein, it is incredibly difficult to begin finding and building meaningful wider support networks whilst in the midst of managing a crisis or response. Much as a school should be constantly developing internal resilience and support networks, it should also be creating those relationships within and across its wider community. This should include parents and parent groups, other schools in the area, local authorities, mental health and wellbeing charities and other support providers. If a school were to experience a traumatic incident of any variety or scale it would immediately have access to a wide range of people and organisations with existing ties to and understanding of the school, its staff and pupils. These organisations and groups should feature in any contingency plans and capability gaps should be addressed.

Admittedly these risks are unlikely and will hopefully never affect your school. But as an example, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in schools that have had to cope with multiple bereavements within their community, from parents and other family members to staff and their families. These sorts of occurrences can result in long-term mental health and wellbeing challenges for the entire school if it is not adequately prepared. Conversely, a school that is itself mentally healthy and supported by a wide network of groups and organisations will be able to mitigate, respond

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Ensure support is in place for staff

If a member of staff experiences any form of emotional trauma, be it through their work or in their personal life, it is hugely important the school offers them sufficient support. This is not only a moral imperative but will ensure they are more likely to stay in work or recover faster and return sooner, minimising the impact on staff absence. A high level of support and care will also ensure they feel valued by the school, as will other staff members who witness this demonstrable commitment to their wellbeing. There are a whole host of potential needs and services to meet them, from counselling to physiotherapy, as well as staff insurance providers like [Schools Advisory Service](#), who include a range of physical and mental health support options in their policies.

