

Southend Essex and Thurrock Educational Psychology Services

Anxiety and Stress: Promoting Resilience and Emotional Well- being in Schools



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Workshop Outline

- How children learn to regulate their emotions and cope with feeling 'wobbly'
- What is anxiety and stress? How anxiety and stress can look in schools – fight or flight responses
- What can we do?
 - Foster resilience? Risk and protective factors
 - Promote positive mental health... Creating a classroom ethos via Connectedness and Relationships
 - Key additional adult roles
 - Support for schools – who else can support you?
 - Critical incident support when sad or traumatic events happen

How babies and infants learn to
regulate their emotions and
manage feelings of stress and
anxiety

Emotions in Infancy



- Children born with potential capacity for regulating chemical levels but this has to be developed – **infants born with no ability to regulate their own emotions.**

Therefore...

- Caregiver regulates stress for infant until gradually learn how to manage it themselves (until their bio-chemical programmes have been set up to aid 'self-regulation').
- Carers do this initially non-verbally (tone of voice, facial expression, touch, mimicking infants noises and entering into their state). When language develops words accompany this 'feedback' of emotions.

stress / anxiety → cortisol secretion

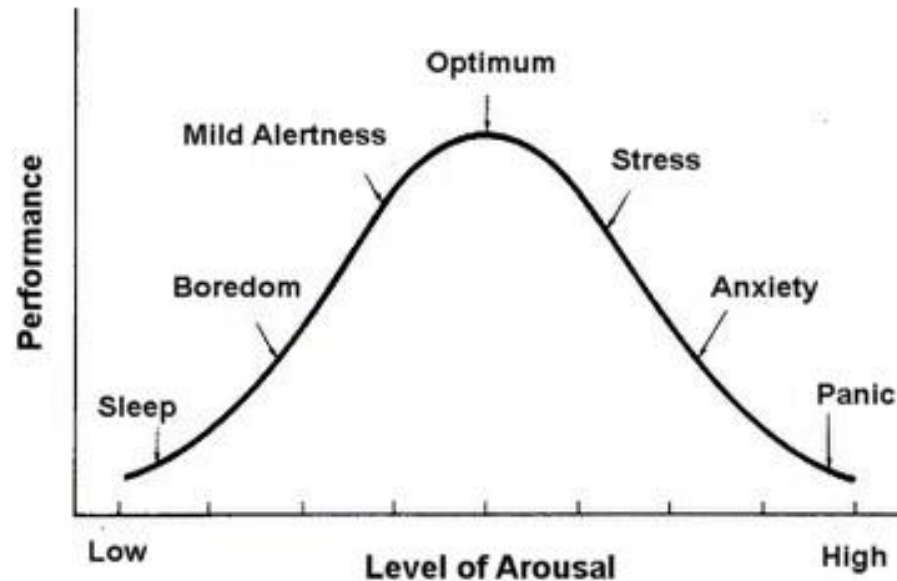
- Empathic holding environment, touch, comfort, rocking found to regulate cortisol secretion and reduces stress levels. Babies heart rates synchronise with the heart rate of the parent.

(Gerhardt, 2004)

What is Emotional 'Regulation'?

- Caregiver 'feels' what the infant feels and understands what / is keen to do something about it...helping the infant gain an 'ok' / restored / balanced emotional state
= regulation
- Children will over time with 'enough' of these consistent experiences learn that others are 'emotionally available' to 'notice & process' feelings; to provide comfort and help to make them feel ok again.
- The experience of growing confidence in being 'heard' and 'understood' supports development of 'inner control'.
- If caregivers are unable to feel with their baby (perhaps because they are experiencing difficulties in noticing and regulating their own feelings) the infant *will not* learn to monitor their own states and adjust them effectively.
- Babies will grow into infants, children, adolescents and adults who cannot manage emotions

The relationship between Arousal & Performance



To perform in the 'zone of optimal functioning' (Yuri Hanin, 1986) a certain level of arousal is needed, a lack of stimulation / motivation or too much intensity of arousal results in low performance

What is stress and anxiety?

What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a feeling of fear or panic. Feeling generally anxious sometimes is normal. Most people worry about something - money or exams - but once the difficult situation is over, you feel better and calm down.
- If the problem has gone but the feeling of fear or panic stays or even gets stronger, that's when anxiety becomes a problem.
- With as many as one in six young people experiencing anxiety at some point, it is very common to have anxiety.



(Source: Young Minds Website 2017)

Indications of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety start out the same as just feeling generally anxious but get worse or last longer than they should. These include:

- Feeling frightened, nervous or panicky all the time
- Getting down or depressed
- Difficulty sleeping
- Low appetite
- Lack of concentration
- Tired and irritable
- Palpitations - when your heart feels like its racing
- Dry mouth
- Trembling
- Feeling faint
- Stomach cramps and/or diarrhoea

Feeling one, some or even most of the above doesn't necessarily mean you have anxiety. Anxiety can look very different in different people.



(Source: Young Minds Website 2017)



Fight, flight, freeze, flock, flap – survival responses

- Fundamental biological reaction to perceived threats to physical or emotional security / safety (which we pick up via our senses)
- Prepares the body to flee, fight or hide
(**5 'F's: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Flock, Flap**)
- Some children are continually in a state of fight or flight, they are operating (or trying to operate) in a high state of emotional arousal
- Emotional hijacking – our thinking states are cut off whilst all energy is conserved for fight or flight.



Three Systems of Response

Bodily Sensations/Physical response:

- Trembling, sweating, shortage of breath, churning stomach, racing heart, weak legs...

Thinking/Psychological response:

- Thoughts about a situation, ideas and beliefs, mental comments, mental pictures...

Behaviour/Behavioural response:

- The way we behave when faced with an anxiety provoking situation, for example through *avoidance*.
- Avoidance allows irrational beliefs to continue or increase because they are never proved wrong or tested out.

3 main ways to soothe:

- Relaxation
- Exercise or Energisers
- Nutrition

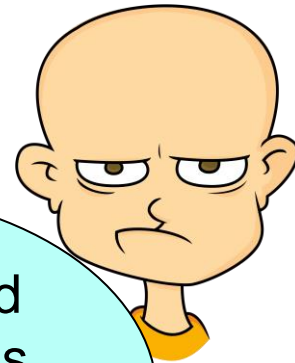
- Importance of having a combination of all 3 for healthy emotional wellbeing.
- Remember that a certain level of arousal is healthy and required for optimal level of performance.
- When young people or adults go over this 'zone' relaxation or breathing techniques may help.
- Young people with SEN will need consideration regarding particular needs or difficulties in relaxing / letting go, particularly YP with SEMH.
- www.relaxkids.com

How can anxiety and stress
present itself in school / in the
classroom?

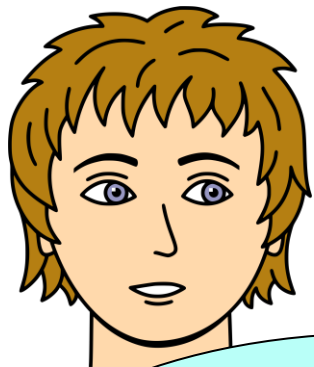
Do you know a student who ...



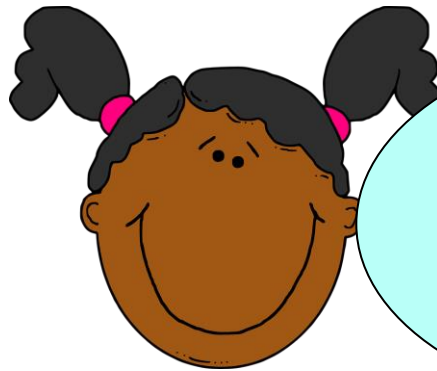
Worries; is easily upset; frets about others; may be fearful?



Gets angry and refuses to do as they are asked; runs or hides or fights



is driven by needs to 'be perfect' and 'please people'? They are the model student, seemingly calm?



Is the life and soul of the class; makes people laugh; wants to ?



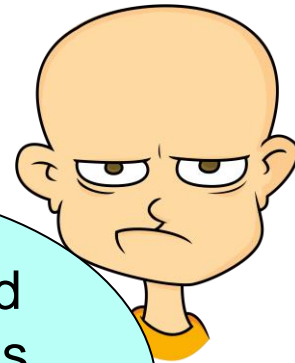
Finds separating from parent hard or refuses to attend school?

Do you know a student who ...



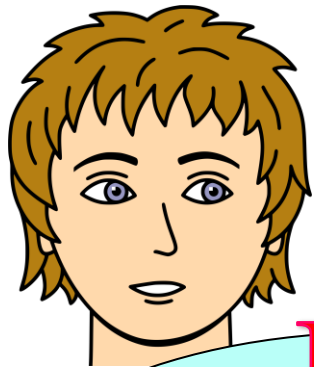
Flight?

Worries; is easily upset; frets about others; may be fearful?



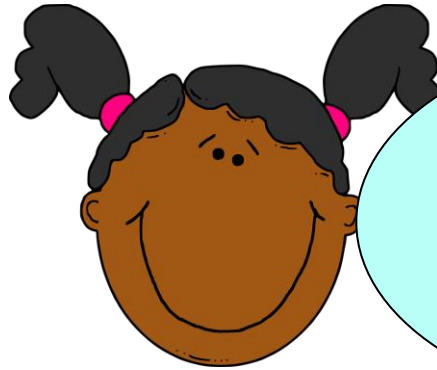
Gets angry and refuses to do as they are asked; runs or hides or fights

Fight?



Freeze?

is driven by needs to 'be perfect' and 'please people'? They are the model student, seemingly calm?



Is the life and soul of the class; makes people laugh; wants to?

Flock?

Flap?

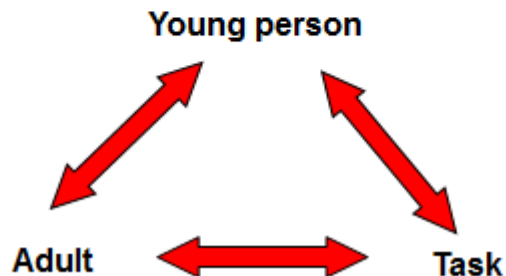


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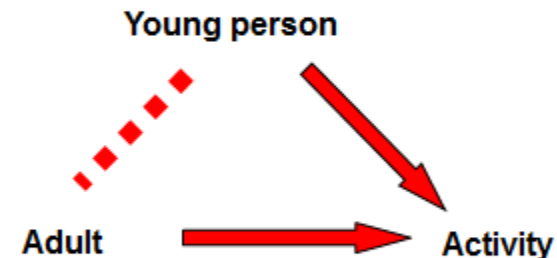
Learning Triangles: A brief overview

Young people with secure attachment experiences can ...

engage in play and learning, communicate and engage in relationships (Trust is assumed within the relationship)



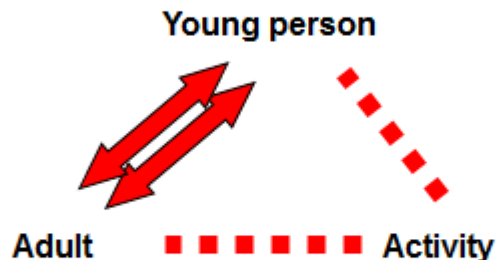
'Relationship Avoidant' Attachment (insecure – anxious avoidant pattern)



YP lets an adult work with them through the task but not through their relationship.

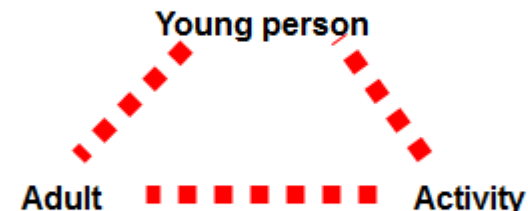
Can adopt false confidence / self reliance

'Task Avoidant' Attachment (insecure: Ambivalent pattern)



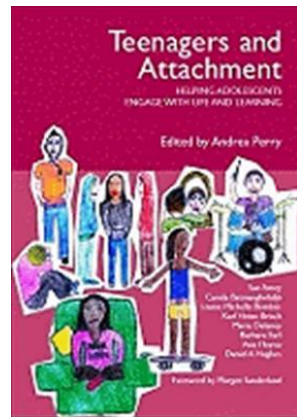
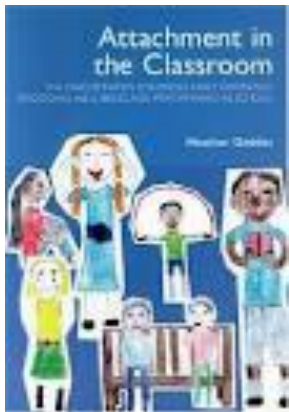
Task experienced as threatening.
YP seeks re-assurance / adult's attention.
Can appear to be 'needing attention' or 'helpless'

'Disorganised' Attachment



Both relationship and task are perceived as threatening
No pattern to relationships between activity / adults
"Treading on eggshells"

Helpful Books about Attachment and Learning



- Attachment in the Classroom, Heather Geddes (2006)
- Inside I'm hurting, Louise Bomber (200*)
- Teenagers and attachment,
- What about me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day, Louise Bomber (200*)
- Settling Troubled Pupils to Learn: Why Relationships Matter in School, Louise Bomber and Daniel Hughes (2013)

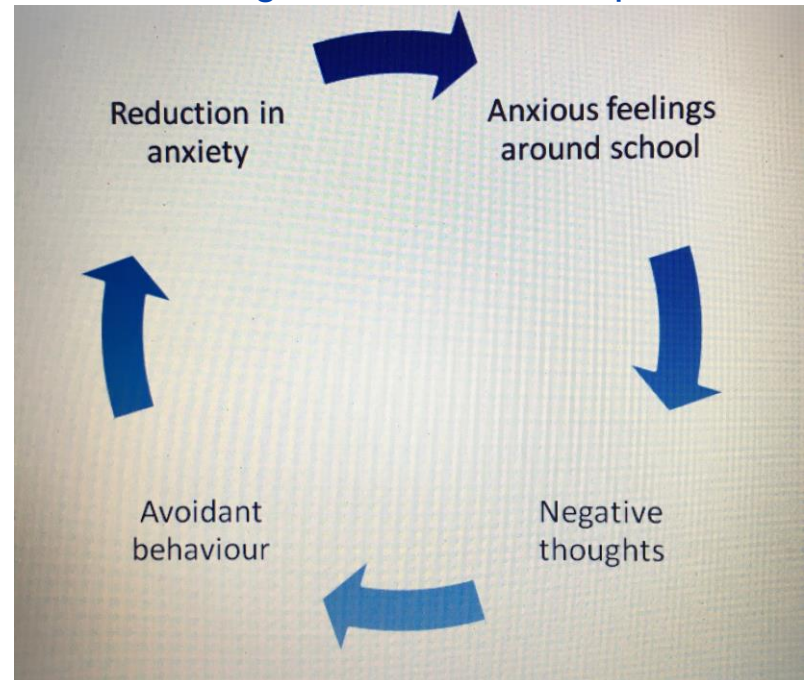
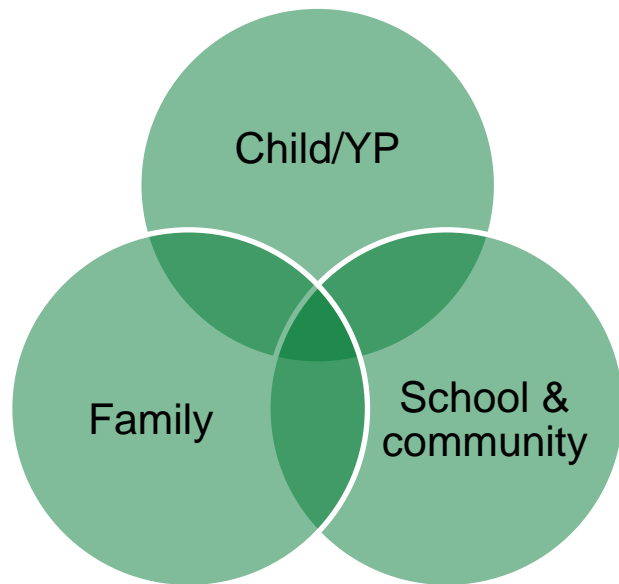
Emotional Based School Refusal

Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR) is a **term** ascribed to the group of young people who do not attend **school** for reasons of fear, anxiety and misery (West Sussex EPS, 2004).

PUSH / PULL factors – Pushing away from school? Pulling towards home?

[https://westsussex-local-](https://westsussex-local-offer.s3.amazonaws.com/public/system/attachments/475/original/ebsr_manual.pdf)

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[Derbyshire guidance on EBSR for schools](#)

What have you got to worry about?!?

What kinds of things might be creating feelings of stress or anxiety for children and young people?

- Academic work / achievement
- Thoughts of future goals / work / college / career / employment options
- Peer relationships – intensity of friendships and romantic / sexual relationships
- Family stresses – relationships within family, separation, violence, drug use, sibling relationships
- Loss and bereavement
- Other mental health issues / stressors / strains (young person themselves or within family or peer group)
- Adolescence – body image, self image, self identity, sexuality, relationships
- Money / finances / social pressures
- Social media – constant stream of communication among peer group

What can we do?

Developing a whole school community approach to promoting positive mental health and resilience – based on developing quality relationships and connectedness within school and families



Developing Resilience

- How we cope with or recover from experiences of distress
- Can be fostered and grown; develops through gradual exposure to difficulties at a manageable level of intensity.
- There are risk factors that make us vulnerable and protective factors that can strengthen resiliency. The more risk factors there are present in someone's life, the more protective factors need to be in place to counter balance. (See handout).

“Get Connected”



Emotionally we develop and meet our everyday needs through the social interactions we have.

“**Connectedness**” is a crucial element of feeling safe; that we belong; are valued and liked and for us to be able to commit to tasks and activities.

Schools and classrooms act as **secure bases** from which children and young people can explore and develop our **resilience** (ability to recover from and cope with life’s ups and downs).

Promote classroom ethos where emphasis is place on strengthening relationships in order to share information, provide emotional support and learn together to achieve more!

What makes a “connecting conversation”?

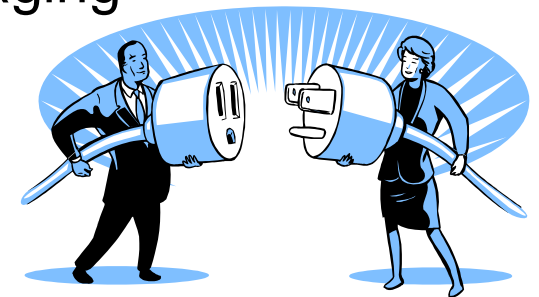
- Being interested and practice ‘active listening’.
- Non verbal feedback very important – don’t force eye contact.
- The conversation highlights the adult having thought about the other person or ‘hold them in mind’ (e.g. I was thinking about what you said ...).
- Components of **Unconditional Positive Regard**:
Respectful; Non-judgmental; Accepting; Valuing; Caring; show concern; Nurturing: wanting to help the person to grow; Compassion; Warmth.
- The conversation should show evidence of the ‘connecting habits’ in relationships rather than the ‘deadly habits’.....



Deadly or Connecting habits?

- Criticising
- Blaming
- Complaining
- Nagging
- Threatening
- Punishing
- Rewarding to control
- Caring
- Trusting
- Listening
- Supporting
- Negotiating
- Befriending
- Encouraging

William Glasser, (1998)



Facilitating the Key Adult role: (Also known as “Additional Attachment Figure”)

‘What makes you think I’m going to trust you?’

- Forming a relationship with the young person; building a connection and rapport; developing trust; leads to rebuilding pathways in brain that will influence the development of belief systems and patterns of how they respond within relationships with others (“second chance learning”).

4 principles of developing secure attachments:

Empathy Stability Consistency Predictability

- Challenges & Benefits of this role – importance of evolving more than one key adult relationship
- Encourage young person to be involved in who would suit this role & negotiate when and where this relationship will appropriately occur.

Facilitating key adult role

- Support and where possible strengthen existing attachment relationships
- Avoid labelling – focus on strengths and skills
- Shame Vs. Compassion “banks”
- Understand the possible reasons for behaviour
- Promote stability, security and continuity
- Provide emotional containment



For children and young people who are ‘wobbly’ and unable to regulate themselves:

“Emotional Containment”

Winnicott (1971)

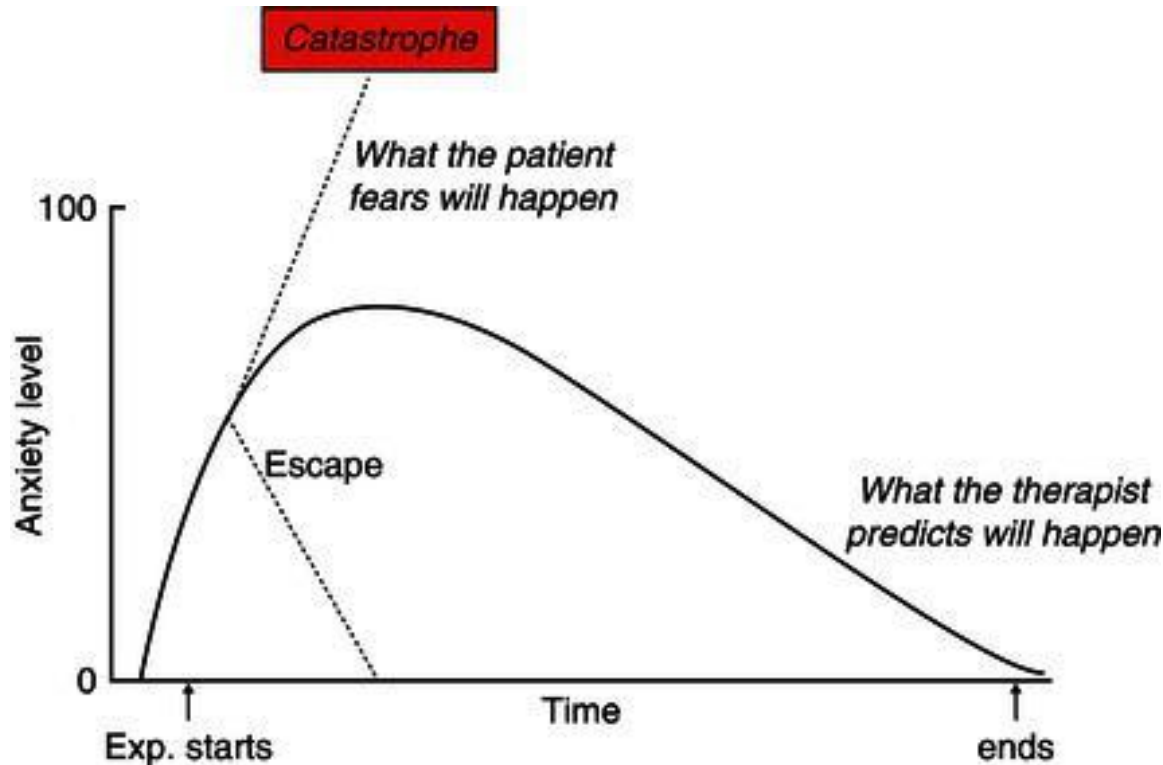
- Communication of acknowledgement; reassurance and security.
- Experiencing an ‘other’ who can take feelings on and manage feelings; hold them and give them back in a way that makes sense and gives a feeling of being understood.
- You can ‘wonder aloud’: (give commentary to what you see going on)

“I’ve noticed that you have become a bit wobbly since we said we were going to do some”

“I’m wondering if the thought of doing makes you feel a bit wobbly”

- Use ‘statements or wonders’ – do not ask questions or expect a response
- Adults ‘contain’ young people’s emotions but also adults need someone to ‘contain their container’!

Anxiety Curve – when we ‘opt out’



When someone gets fearful and they ‘escape’ or ‘opt out’ their anxiety lessens quickly but they don’t develop resiliency.... The experience that they can cope with and recover from the distress of sticking with the anxiety.

Parents / Carers / Key adults can support children and YP to hang on, manage the rise in anxiety and learn that they don’t reach the catastrophe phase, but the anxiety lessens in time.

Emotion Coaching

- 1. Be aware of your own feelings and observe the child** – what clues are they showing you as to how they might be feeling? (body language, facial expressions). Understand that all emotions are natural to feel.
- 2. Connect with the child** – spend time with them, watching them and learning about what they like, how they behave when feeling various emotions, what helps them to feel ok again. Use emotional moments as opportunities to connect. Encourage talk about feelings.
- 3. Listen to the child, without judgement or criticism.** Validate their feelings. Separate behaviour from feelings (e.g. what they feel is ok but may need to consider how they behave when they feel like this).
- 4. Name emotions ('WOBBLY') and help child to name feelings.** Name your own and talk about them as a model. Help child to develop a vocabulary of feelings.
- 5. Find solutions together** – work through behaviour problems '**WDEP**' Can be helpful: **WHAT** is it you need/want? Is what you are **DOING** helping you get this? **EVALUATE** – how is this working out for you? Do you feel ok? **PLAN** – how might you do things next time? Any ideas for getting what you want in a better way?

Looking after ourselves and each other:

Key adult role

- Active involvement is costly in terms of energy; effort and time – but can make a tremendous difference and support growth of resilience. Adult needs to be emotionally and physically present.
- Support; supervision and time for reflection is important in looking after yourself and each other. Could there be a sharing group?
- Be mindful of ‘secondary stress’ – feeling another's’ feelings for them (containment; projected feelings)
 - How can you share how you are feeling?
 - What ways can you acknowledge how you are feeling?
 - Are you feeling emotions that are too intense or painful for the young person to feel?
 - Do you ever question your own competency or skills when feeling a certain way?

Whole School Support – from the staff room to formal systems of supervision

- What systems support you in your role?
 - What else would you like?
- Possibilities for future....
 - Staff sharing groups
 - Solution Circles
 - Support group / supervision
 - Coaching
 - Buddy systems / peer support
 - ??????
 - ??????



Who else can support you as a school?

Other services you can call upon?

- **EWMHS** (Emotional Wellbeing Mental Health Service) offer to schools
- Charity and other voluntary services
- Commissioned services
- Services available through the local authority e.g. **Educational Psychology Service** / Specialist Teacher Teams / Safeguarding advisor for schools
- Teams and systems that may sit within your school? E.g. School Nurses,
- School clusters and joint working (e.g. trusts?)
- ??
- ??
- ??
- ??



Critical Incident Support



When a traumatic event happens within a school community that impacts on the functioning of their day to day e.g. death of a pupil or member of staff; coach accident on school trip; house or school fire.

When such events occur, feelings of anxiety and worry can be heightened.

Southend Essex and Thurrock **Educational Psychology Services** all provide CI support to schools. Please contact your local service for more information.

[Essex Educational Psychology Service Critical Incident Response Offer click here](#)

[A4 Poster to display in Essex Schools click here](#) (info on Essex schools infolink)

EPs provide guidance to school staff to enable them to provide support to their school community. This includes helping to implement plans, identify vulnerable people for support and providing emotional support alongside school staff.

References and helpful reading: