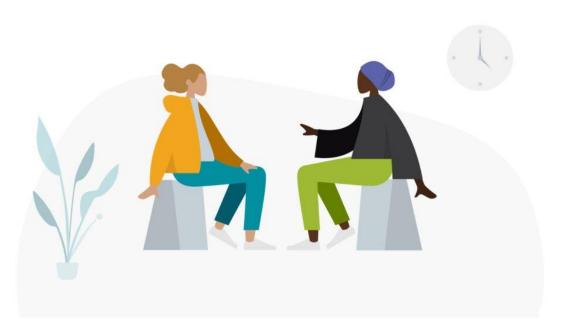# Creating an Environment for Post-Incident Support

Creating opportunities for individuals and professionals to share their different perspectives.

When incidents occur, whether in a school or other health and social care setting, it can feel immensely destabilising and upsetting for everyone involved. Emotions run high and it may take some time for all parties to decompress and recover afterwards.

However, once the incident has passed and the dust has settled, the most important thing to do is initiate the repair and restoration process. And to do that, we need to create the right post-incident environment for both the individual and for any staff involved.

A values-based approach

The underlying principle of a positive workplace culture is that we value the individuals we care for and work with, and everything we do is rooted in respect and dignity. During and after moments of crisis, we need to keep this core belief front and centre, to ensure our values are reflected in the post-incident support we provide.

What does that look like in reality? It means adopting a person-centric approach where we prioritise and validate people's feelings; it means providing opportunities for individuals and professionals to share their different perspectives, without judgement, shame or blame; it means actively listening and learning to better understand what led to the incident so it can be avoided in the future; and it means repairing and maintaining strong relationships built on mutual trust and respect.

Obstacles to the process of repair

There's no doubt that we are all, as professionals, committed to creating the conditions which facilitate the repair and restoration process. We endeavour to strike the balance between formal and structured, and informal and relaxed in our approach to post-incident support. Most importantly, perhaps, we strive to repair relationships that may have been adversely affected by the incident.

However, constraints on time, space and resources can present a real challenge to effective and desirable post-incident support. Often, despite everyone's best intentions, the process can fall somewhat short. For example, sometimes the physical environment (such as a formal meeting room) inhibits relaxed, comfortable discussions; or maybe there are endless lists of questions to answer that are difficult to communicate and that do not serve the needs of the participants; or perhaps, because of a lack of time, the process is rushed, and those involved do not feel they have had adequate opportunity to be heard.

While all of these factors are entirely understandable, they can hinder us from creating the right environment for post-incident support.

Thinking outside the box

Nurturing an optimal environment for post-incident support requires us to think creatively. If the aim is to foster conditions where all parties feel comfortable, at ease and ready to have open, honest discussions about what happened, we need to give serious thought to the different aspects of the environment.

Firstly, let's consider the physical environment, or the 'where'. Due to the nature of the majority of settings, post-incident discussions often take place in formal meeting rooms. These sorts of rooms, along with offices and conference rooms, can give an air of formality and are not always conducive to holding relaxed discussions between individuals and staff.

Instead, it might be worth considering taking a walk outside or going for a coffee together, if that is appropriate. Getting out into the fresh air and having 'side by

side' conversations can feel less confrontational and can allow individuals to open up more freely.

Listening to understand

Once you have decided on the most appropriate physical environment, it is crucial to consider how the process itself will look. Central to any effective post-incident support is taking the time to listen to everyone's perspective and to establish what can be learned. The Listening and Learning model can help ensure that relationships are repaired and restored promptly, and that the outcome of any incident is, ultimately, positive.

Active listening means listening to understand and requires more than just our ears: it may involve facing the person talking and maintaining eye contact, though this should never be forced as it can be incredibly uncomfortable for some; adopting a relaxed, open stance; respecting an individual's personal space; and demonstrating responsive behaviour, such as nodding and smiling.

Holding time and space for someone else's perspective is vital, so avoid the temptation to interrupt, join in, or ask questions while they are sharing their thoughts and feelings. The priority has got to be focusing on and listening to the individual.

Learning from an incident

After listening carefully, we can factor in time to share different perspectives and discuss the choices made. After all, we are all human and we all have feelings that are valid and that drive our behaviours and actions. Effective post-incident support does not involve blame or judgement; rather, it involves an exploration of how we and the individuals we support can work together in the future to reduce the chance of recurrence.

When you feel it is appropriate to ask questions to seek clarification, it can be useful to follow a framework to guide the conversation. If there are any barriers to communication, questions may need to be adapted to match the needs of the individual, such as making them into picture cards or signs.

Possible questions to use might be:

- *Can you tell me, in your own words, what happened?*

- *What were you feeling and thinking at the time?*

- *How have you felt about it since?*

- *Who has been affected and in what way?*

- *How do you think things could have been done differently?*

- *What do you think needs to happen next?*

These questions can be used with all parties involved in the post-incident process as they encourage self-reflection and prompt individuals to articulate their thoughts and feelings.

Again, just like active listening, we need to be aware of the verbal and non-verbal cues we are demonstrating when engaging in questioning. *How is our body stance? Do we look and sound relaxed? Is our facial expression at odds with our words? How is the other person responding? Do we need to adapt our language or tone of voice?*

An open and honest environment

Of course, recording, reporting and reviewing incidents after they occur is essential, but before those processes can happen, our priority should be creating the right environment for repairing and restoring relationships.

This takes time and patience and cannot be forced, but by creating an environment of openness and honesty, an environment free of criticism and judgement, we can ensure that we learn from incidents and reduce the likelihood of them happening again.