

Managing UASC worry and anxiety and promoting resilience

What does mental health look like in UASC?

During their difficult journeys to the UK and potentially traumatic experiences in their country of origin UASC will have carried a great deal of anxiety and worry with them. These trauma or anxiety can be triggered again in the UK during the process of applying for refugee status. These might be the cause for the following behaviours:

- Sleep difficulties, either difficulty getting to sleep or having nightmares during the night
- Flashbacks
- Anger or irritability
- Lack of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Physical symptoms like headaches or tummy pain
- The fear of going out and isolating themselves in their room
- Being overly attached

It is common for these young people to be traumatised but they don't necessarily have 'post-traumatic stress disorder'. Therefore trauma therapy isn't necessarily helpful at this early stage. During the asylum process the young people will feel scared and anxious so therapy is unlikely to be successful. Although you can't take these young people's worries away from them, as much as you might want to, there are things you can do to help them build their resilience and manage some of their feelings.

What coping strategies are helpful?

Listening to a young person's worries can be invaluable in helping them to cope with their difficult feelings. However, they may struggle to do so if they don't yet feel safe or find it difficult to trust others. If they are becoming preoccupied with worrying thoughts or images, using distraction techniques rather than focusing on the subjects may be a helpful way of looking after their mental wellbeing. [See attached links for some ideas.](#)

In cases of panic or flashbacks, some find that stimulating all five senses can be helpful way of grounding them in the present, where they are safe ([see attached handout](#)). This is often a useful technique if have woken up from a nightmare that may contain some of the difficulties they have experienced. Some people use the following technique, where a young person should look for:

- 5 things they can see

- 4 things they can feel
- 3 things they can hear
- 2 things they can smell
- 1 thing they can taste

Although you will not be able to rid a young person of their problems, you can play a role in improving their emotional resilience (i.e. their ability to cope with stressful situations). This can help them to manage their own anxiety and stress better and help them to cope with the challenges ahead of them.

In the first few weeks, a few things you can do to help are:

Stability

- GIVE THEM TIME
- Make them feel welcome
- Believe what they say

Safety

- The young people worry about being stopped by the Police and not having any ID so give them YOUR details and how they can contact you in an emergency
- Reassure them that the house and their bedroom is safe (they often worry about people trying to take them away or attack them in their room)

Security

- Show them that they are cared for
- Show kindness, empathy and compassion

Activities

- Engage them in sport and social activities as soon as possible (gym, football, global social club, table tennis club, allotment)

Friendships

- Try and link up with young people who speak the same language to avoid isolation
- See if they can meet friends through school and their activities

Emotional Support

- Be available if they want to talk to you
- Listen
- Give reassurance
- Ensure they have a routine

Research suggests that facilitating one item in at least two of the categories on the attached resilience framework (Hart & Blincow, 2007) can be helping in fostering emotional resilience. (See attached)

Sleep

Sleep is an important part of this puzzle of resilience as a lack of sleep makes it harder for people to regulate their emotions. As disturbed sleep is often a problem in the UASC population, employing

specific sleep hygiene can be hugely beneficial in helping a young person in processing their experiences and coping with daily life in the UK.

As many UASC reached the UK by sleeping during the day and travelling at night, their body clock will be reversed and will take time to go back to a day night cycle. Regular routine will assist with this, as well as things like:

- Using a night light (helps feel safer and adjust to sleeping at night)
- Placing a bag of lavender under their pillow
- Avoiding sleeping or napping during the day
- Avoiding watching videos about their situation from back home
- Avoiding screens and electronic devices before bed
- Avoid emotionally upsetting conversations before bed

Please see attached sleep handout for more suggestions.

Exercise

Research by Kent UASC health project highlights the importance of physical activity on UASC wellbeing, highlighting the following benefits:

- Releases chemicals which make you feel happier and more relaxed and provides distraction from stressful thoughts, lowering levels of stress hormones
- Team sports provide an opportunity for socialising and a sense of belonging
- Physical exercise will make you feel sleepier when you go to bed
- Some suggestion in research that exercise that stimulates both sides of the body (e.g. running, swimming) can be beneficial if a UASC is experiencing any PTSD like symptoms. This type of movement can help a young person to combine traumatic memories that may be 'playing on loop' in the emotional side of their brain with the rational, thinking part of their brain.

When to consider referral to a mental health service

- If lack of sleep is affecting the young person's (yp) functioning e.g. unable to concentrate at school; too tired to see friends; sleeping during the day.
- If the yp is having flash-backs which makes them avoid certain things e.g going outside, getting into a car.
- If they isolate themselves in their room but also have low mood (often young people do like to spend time in their room, which is normal behaviour)
- Ongoing tearfulness
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- If they start to become angry or agitated
- If the yp is having paranoid thoughts or shows high anxiety

- If the yp is requesting to talk to someone about how they are feeling and want some emotional support.

Carer resilience

This cohort of young people come with difficult and upsetting stories which can be very draining. Whilst it isn't necessarily possible to take away the worries of a young person or influence processes around their refugee status, the value of being there for the young person and attuning yourself with their difficult feelings cannot be underestimated. However, this can be a draining and difficult - especially given issues with communication and cultural differences.

Looking after your own wellbeing as a foster carer is therefore very important. Engaging in your own self-care activities or taking a night off can help give you the boost to help your young people through what can be a very uncertain time in their lives.