

NICOLA LESTER

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA CONSULTANCY

SPECIAL GUIDANCE

Making SENSE of COVID-19:

Trauma informed approaches to engagement

MARCH 2020



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Background

The impact of COVID-19 and its associated restrictions is being experienced across communities, impacting on children, young people and their families. It is a time when anxiety levels are high and the future seems uncertain. This is compounded by daily changes to guidance from the government which have an immediate effect, often with little time to plan and adjust. Arrangements for home schooling and working from home may mean that it is difficult to find a sense of structure and purpose. As such, there is an increasing risk for those that we work with to become quickly overwhelmed resulting in low levels of motivation and engagement with services and sources of support. People of all ages are being faced with large amounts of (changing) information leading to confusion and uncertainty with regards to both the current situation and the future.

A changing worldview

From a trauma perspective, this crisis has meant that everything that we thought we knew about the world around us has changed and we are all now faced with the possibility of having to reconstruct a worldview that takes into account this instability, fear and uncertainty. Many people will no longer feel safe, they will be on high-alert, anxious and frightened as they begin the process of adjusting to a different way of life.

It is important to remember that people are resilient and capable of both coping and adjusting. Recognising this strength and resilience is an important starting point for engagement. Our role is now to support them to cope. However, many of the ways in which we would normally offer that support have now changed and so we too need to adjust to a different way of working.

Managing the effects

It is essential to understand that we are engaging with people at the current time who are in a state of stress. This means that they may:

- Become quickly overwhelmed by information and advice
- Struggle to retain and process information
- Find it difficult to remember things
- Struggle to concentrate and focus (this may include remaining engaged with support and their ability to follow advice)
- Disconnect from those around them (including sources of support)

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Making SENSE of COVID-19

The SENSE model was initially developed in response to the Manchester bombing in May 2017 and has been adapted over the past three years to structure psychosocial support to other critical incidents both in the UK and overseas. The five stages of the SENSE model can be delivered via email and telephone and will provide an effective way of promoting support and engagement and maintaining this over the coming weeks as the restrictions continue.

The people that we are working with may have already been referred to our services as a result of

their previous experiences of trauma and we may feel under pressure to continue to undertake this specific work with them during this time. It is likely that this will be of limited benefit given the scale of the national and international crisis and instead our whole focus should be on stabilising and supporting them to cope and manage during this time. It may be helpful to share with them your approach to their care to provide them with the reassurance that their needs and experiences are not being overlooked, this will serve to validate the importance of their individual circumstances to ensure that we remain person-centred and responsive. Essentially at this time, as the situation continues to unfold and change, we are offering a safe and non-judgmental space for those we are working with.

The five stages of the SENSE model are designed to be implemented in chronological order and to provide a sense of structure and purpose to our engagement with those we are working with. It may be beneficial to explain the stages as this will help the person to feel as

though they are making progress, particularly if we build in regular opportunities for review.

Stage 1: Stabilisation

Addressing people's immediate practical and emotional needs is an important first step. Try to find out if they have the things that they need. This may include food, toiletries and medication but it is also important to explore what they consider to be 'essential' as this will mean different things to different people and

is a good way of promoting engagement. With an emphasis on a 'national effort', some people may feel guilty about needing and wanting non-essential items but it is important

that their individual needs are validated and understood, and where possible and safe to do so, you help them to address these needs.

Stages 2 and 3: Education and Normalisation

Helping people to understand and recognise how they feel can be helpful. This will provide them with reassurance that they are having a normal response and that it is the crisis which is abnormal, not how they are coping with it. It may also be helpful to name some of the things that they may be feeling. There is a national focus on acts of kindness with recent headlines accusing the population of being 'selfish' as they struggle to adjust to the restrictions. This could leave people feeling guilty and unable to share how they are really feeling for fear of being judged. Not everyone will welcome the opportunity to spend more time with children at home and they may feel guilty for not enjoying this time. Whilst the number of ideas which are circulating on-line which offer ideas about how to focus this time

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can be a useful resource, they may also create a sense of pressure and failure if people do not engage with these ideas.

Stage 4: Social Support

Promoting access to social support is a key component of the original model, however, given the restrictions on social contact and the need for social distancing, how this is promoted and facilitated will require a more creative and innovative approach.

Again, it is worth acknowledging that WhatsApp and FB groups may not suit everyone and people may become quickly overwhelmed by the information which is being shared and the experiences which are being discussed. When thinking about promoting access to social support, it is worth encouraging those you are working with to consider not just who is a source of social support but how best to access them. For example, they may prefer direct engagement rather than being part of a wider support group or find it easier to communicate via text, email or a telephone call. In this case social support is more than just identifying who is available but more specifically how can they be accessed in a way which is helpful, meaningful and sustainable.

One activity to help identify this might be to undertake an exercise called 'social mapping'. This helps to identify not just who is in the person's life but the level of support they

provide and whether or not this is reciprocated. To adapt this activity to the current situation you could also ask them to annotate the map as to the best way of accessing this support and encourage them to structure this access (e.g. setting a specific time to engage with someone on a daily or weekly basis). This should also give you a sense of who they might also be supporting and an insight into the effect of this on their own wellbeing.

Stage 5: Engagement

The final stage remains focused on promoting the person's engagement with sources of support and activities which they find meaningful and beneficial. Given the large number of resources and ideas available online, it is important during this stage to help the person to think about their needs, their interests (and those of the wider family) and what is achievable. From here you can work in collaboration with the person to create a personalised support plan detailing resources and ideas to help them to plan how they will spend their time, either individually or as a whole family. The purpose here is to utilise the wide range of resources which are currently available to create a tailored package of support which is relevant to their interests and needs and at the same time seeks to reduce the potential for overwhelm by creating realistic goals which can be reviewed and refined on a regular basis.

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Trauma informed approaches to engagement: working remotely

It is particularly important when delivering support remotely to demonstrate trauma informed practice. This will ensure that the person feels safe, cared for and connected and will help to overcome some of the barriers of providing support remotely.

1. Safety

Creating a sense of physical and emotional safety is particularly important when you are not able to provide face to face support. Practical considerations such as the method of communication and the timing and length of sessions will help to offer a sense of professionalism and structure which the person will likely find reassuring. It is important that these contacts are regarded as 'sessions' in their own right and that people are encouraged to view them as appointments in which specific pieces of work will be undertaken.

Remember creating emotional safety is achieved by drawing on the key components of effective communication skills:

- Being patient
- Being non judgmental
- Being kind
- Being consistent
- Being honest
- Being understanding
- Listening actively
- Bearing witness to distress

2. Choice (restoring choice and control)

At a time when we are all experiencing a loss of control over our own lives, it becomes even more essential to ensure that we provide a choice to those we are working with. This should include presenting them with options wherever possible even when choices are

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becoming increasingly limited. Remember that you are working in collaboration or partnership with the person and rather than thinking about doing things 'for' or 'to' someone, think of it as doing things

with them. Using words like 'we' rather than 'you' can often be helpful to promote this sense of partnership.

3. Facilitating connections

Taking the time to understand a person's networks of support and encouraging them to connect with them is a key stage of the SENSE model, remember that this should also include understanding the nature of this support and how best it can be accessed. Perhaps more so than ever before the current crisis is something which affects us all and may provide a useful opportunity for connection and developing a relationship based on reciprocity and the sharing of experiences (as far as feels safe and comfortable to do so).

4. Supporting coping

It is particularly important to work within the person's level of tolerance and respect their boundaries in order to support their capacity

to cope. This involves recognising the potential that their ability to cope may change on a daily or weekly basis as the restrictions change, requiring the person to continually adjust their lives. Remember to prioritise their needs over what you need to do or what you think that they need to do. Everybody copes differently and there is no right or wrong way, we are all learning to live very differently.

5. Responding to identity and context

Responding to identity and context involves thinking about who you are working with in terms of their:

- Gender
- Background and family
- Religious beliefs
- Political affiliations
- Circumstances

In the current situation it is also important to explore how those you are working with are making sense of their world and the world around them. Remember that the current crisis will mean different things to different people and it is essential to provide them with a safe and non-judgmental space in which to consider this impact without making assumptions as to its effect.

6. Building strengths

Finally, the focus should remain on building strengths. Many of those we are working with have been exposed to trauma or adversity in the past, emphasising their resilience and ability to cope is an important starting point for this work.

Self-care

We are faced with the unprecedented challenge of providing support to those we work alongside whilst we are also affected by the stress of the current situation and may experience many of our own challenges over the forthcoming weeks. It is important to acknowledge this impact on ourselves, our lives and on our capacity to provide support to others. For some it may be helpful to focus on the needs of those we work with, for others, it may be less so. There is no right or wrong way of coping, make sure you listen to and respond to what you need, draw on the support around you and apply the same kindness, care and compassion to those you work with, to yourself.

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