

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN GRIEF

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from any of the following:

- **Continued structure in the schedule for the day.** It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school where they can grieve with others. They can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule and showing up for all or many of their usual classes because there is a sense of routine. Suspend the academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period; in others, all day.
- **Consistency in discipline,** with flexibility. Often at these times, students feel that life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if the behavior of peers is not within the usual realm of the classroom. Exceptions may be made with expectations of how much academic work gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of school life which do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure. Students do **not** need for you to become an instant counselor. They **do** need for you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged. If your school is going through a tragedy or trauma, the first day or two may be a bit of an emotional roller coaster ride.
- **The truth** about what has happened. If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity and is essential to your credibility.
- **The opportunity to talk about the event** as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Also, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.
- **Understanding that this event might be a "trigger"** which is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something frightening in their histories.
- **Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that,** if they come from a dysfunctional home, their ability to cope with grief is likely diminished.
- **Being allowed to use the Safe Room** even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on schoolwork until they've had the opportunity to process some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the Safe Room, and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving process.

- **To find meaning in the event.**
- **Help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students about whether they've ever been to a funeral, what it was like, and what to expect with this one.

Encourage students to:

- **Support each other** for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- **Put extra energy into friendships.** Exchange phone numbers with each other.
- **Take good care of themselves** by eating well and getting lots of rest.

Classroom Activities List

In addition to discussion, teachers can help students deal with their reactions to a crisis through a variety of classroom activities. Classroom activities enable students to express and discuss feelings about crises. The following are simply examples to stimulate teachers' planning.

PRE-SCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN ACTIVITIES

Play Reenactment

Toys that encourage play reenactment of students' experiences and observations during a traumatic experience can help integrate the experiences. Useful toys include fire trucks, rescue trucks, dump trucks, ambulances, building blocks and dolls.

Physical Contact

Children need lots of physical contact during times of stress to regain a sense of security. Games involving structured physical touching help to meet this need.

Nourishment

Extra amounts of finger foods and fluids help provide the emotional and physical nourishment children need in times of stress. Oral satisfaction is especially necessary, because children tend to revert to more regressive or primitive behavior in response to feelings that their survival or security is threatened.

Puppets

Playing with puppets can be effective in reducing inhibitions and encouraging children to discuss their feelings.

Art

Have the children do a mural on butcher paper with topics such as what happened when the traumatic event occurred. This is recommended for small groups with discussion afterward, directed by an adult. Have the children draw individual pictures about the event and then discuss or act out elements of their pictures. This activity allows for discussing experiences, and helps children discover that others share their fears.

Stories

Read stories to the children that tell about other children's (or animals') experiences in a disastrous event. This can be a non-threatening way to convey common reactions to frightening experiences, and to stimulate discussion. It helps to emphasize how people resolve feelings of fear.

Large Muscle Activity

When children are restless or anxious, any activities that involve large muscle movements are helpful. You might try your own simple version of doing exercises to music, like skipping and jumping.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Play Reenactment

For younger children, using toys that encourage play reenactment of their experience and observations during the traumatic event can help integrate the traumatic experience. Toys might include ambulances, dump trucks, fire trucks, building blocks and dolls.

Puppets

Play with puppets can be effective in reducing inhibitions and encouraging children to talk about their feelings and thoughts. Children often will respond more freely to a puppet asking about what happened than to an adult asking the questions directly. Help or encourage students to develop skits or puppet shows about what happened in the event. Encourage them to include anything positive about the experience as well as those aspects that were frightening or disconcerting.

Art and Discussion Groups

Do a group mural on butcher paper with topics such as "What happened in your (*neighborhood, school name or home*) when the traumatic event occurred?" This is recommended for small groups with discussion afterward, facilitated by an adult. This type of activity can help students feel less isolated with their fears and provide the opportunity to vent feelings. Have the children draw individual pictures and then talk about them in small groups. It is important in the group discussion to end on a positive note (such as a feeling of mastery or preparedness, noting that the community or family pulled together to deal with the crisis:), in addition to providing the opportunity to talk about their feelings about what took place.

Share Your Own Experience

Stimulate group discussion about disaster experiences by sharing your own feelings, fears or experiences. It is important to legitimize feelings to help students feel less isolated.

Disaster Plans

Have the children brainstorm their own classroom or family disaster plan. What would they do if they had to evacuate? How would they contact parents? How should the family be prepared? How could they help the family?

Reading

Read aloud, or have the children read, stories or books that talk about children or families dealing with stressful situations, pulling together during times of hardship, and similar themes.

Creative Writing or Discussion Topics

In a discussion or writing assignment, have the children describe in detail a very scary intense moment in time and a very happy moment. Create a group story, recorded by the teacher, about a dog or cat that was in an earthquake, flood or other disaster. What happened to him? What did he do? How did he feel? You can help the students by providing connective elements. Emphasize creative problem-solving and positive resolution.

Playacting

In small groups, play the game, "If you were an animal, what would you be?" You might adapt discussion questions such as "If you were that animal, what would you do when some traumatic event occurred?" Have the children take turns acting out an emotion in front of the class, without talking, and have the rest of the class guess what the feeling is and why the student might have that feeling. Do this for good as well as bad feelings.

Other Disasters

Have the children bring in newspaper clippings on disasters that have happened in other parts of the world. Ask the students how they imagine the survivors might have felt or what they might have experienced.

Tension Breakers

A good tension breaker when students are restless is the co-listening exercise. Have the children quickly pair up with a partner. Child #1 takes a turn at talking about anything he or she wants to, while Child #2 simply listens. After three minutes, they switch roles and Child #2 talks while Child #1 listens.

Also, when the children are anxious and restless, any activities that involve large muscle movements are helpful. You might try doing your own version of exercises to music, like skipping or jumping.

JUNIOR HIGH AND HIGH SCHOOL

Activities

Classroom activities that relate the traumatic event to course study can be a good way to help students integrate their experiences and observations, while providing specific learning experiences. In implementing the following suggestions, or ideas of your own, it is important to allow time for the students to discuss feelings stimulated by the projects or issues being covered.

Home Room Class

Group discussion of their experiences of the event is particularly important among adolescents. They need the opportunity to express feelings, as well as to normalize the extreme emotions they may have experienced. A good way to stimulate such a discussion is for the teacher to share his or her own reactions to the event. The students may need considerable reassurance that even extreme emotions and crazy thoughts are normal in a traumatic event. It is important to end such discussions on a positive note, such as talking about what heroic acts were observed.

Break the class into small groups and have them develop a disaster plan for their home, school or community. This can help students regain a sense of mastery and security, as well as having practical merit. The small groups can then share their plans in a discussion with the entire class. Conduct a class discussion and/or support a class project on how the students might help the community recovery effort. It is important to help them develop concrete and realistic ways they might be of assistance. Community involvement can help overcome feelings of helplessness and frustration, and deal with survivor's guilt and other common reactions in disaster situations.

Have a home safety or preparedness quiz. What would you do under certain circumstances (such as finding a hurt child, being without water or electricity, or having an earthquake hit the area).

Talk about what is necessary to survive in the wilderness. How does this knowledge apply to a community following a disaster? Encourage students who have had first aid training to demonstrate basic techniques to the class.

Science

Conduct projects on stress, physiological response to stress, and how to deal with it.

Creative Writing

Ask the students to write about an intense moment they remember very clearly, not a day or an hour, but a short period of time lasting no more than three minutes.

Make up a funny disaster.

Write a story about a person who is in a disaster and give it a happy ending.

Literature or Reading

Have the students read a story or novel about young people or families who have experienced hardship or disaster. Have a follow-up discussion on how they might react if they were the character in the story.

Psychology Class

Initiate a discussion on how course content might apply to the stress reactions students observed during and following a traumatic event. Discuss post-traumatic stress

syndrome. Have a guest speaker from Mental Health Services or a therapist involved in counseling victims speak to the class.

Peer Listening

Provide information on common responses to traumatic events. Use structured exercises using skills students are learning in class to help them integrate their experiences. Point out that victims need to repeat their stories many times. Students can help family and friends affected by the event by using good listening skills.

Health Class

Discuss emotional reactions to the event and the importance of taking care of one's own emotional well being. Discuss health hazards in a disaster, such as water contamination or food that may have gone bad due to lack of refrigeration. Discuss health precautions and safety measure. Guest speakers from public health and/or mental health and from the fire department might talk to the class.

Art Class

Have the students portray their experiences or observations of the event in various art media.

Have the students do a group project, such as a mural, showing the community recovery efforts following a disaster.

Speech/Drama

Have the students portray the catastrophic emotions that come up in response to a traumatic event. Have the students develop a skit about some aspect of the event.

Math Class

Have the class solve mathematical problems related to the impact of the event.

Social Studies/Government

Study governmental agencies responsible for aid to victims. How do they work? How effective are they? Write letters or petitions to agencies responsible for handling disasters. Discuss the political implications of the event within a community.

History Class

Discuss historical events and disasters. Discuss how the victims and survivors of those events might have felt. Have the students bring in newspaper clippings on current events in other parts of the world. What kinds of experiences might the victims have had? Have you experienced anything similar?

Center for Mental Health in the Schools at UCLA. (2004). [A resource aid packet on responding to a crisis at a school](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu). Los Angeles, CA: Author. Revised May 2004. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Facilitating Classroom Discussion - Guidelines

In general, informing and discussing a traumatic event with students is best done in small-groups where questions can be answered, rumors clarified, and concerns addressed. Some students may choose not to enter into discussion, and some may even express a desire to be excused. Don't force the situation; honor the student's wishes.

Students often start off by saying such things as:

- ☞ I feel terrible.*
- ☞ S/he was my friend.*
- ☞ Why did it have to happen?*
- ☞ I'm really mad that it happened.*
- ☞ We knew he was upset; we should have done something.*
- ☞ Things like this don't make sense.*
- ☞ It could happen to me.*
- ☞ It's just one of those things.*
- ☞ I can't believe it.*
- ☞ If it weren't for (name of someone), it wouldn't have happened.*

You can often help keep students more fully express their thoughts and feelings by paraphrasing what they have just said. Try not to make intrusive comments. At the same time, move the discussion away from any attempts to glamorize or romanticize the event.

After they have been able to express themselves, you need to let them know that what they are thinking and feeling is very natural under the circumstances and that, for some of them, it may take a while before such thoughts and feelings are worked through.

Be sure to tell them that who is available to students if they or a friend are very upset. Watch for any student who appears very upset and follow predetermined procedures for connecting that student with someone who is ready to provide psychological first aid.

Psychological Education Groups

Psychological Education groups help dispel incorrect perceptions about the crisis event, help to promote a sense of control in the recovery process, emphasize strengths and self-efficacy, and provide connections to mental health resources. Psychological education groups can be facilitated by trained teachers or mental health professionals and offered to small groups, classroom groups, staff meetings or larger community meetings.

Outline

1. Introduce the discussion
 - Introduce facilitators
 - Describe the purpose, process and outline of discussion
 - Establish group rules
2. Answer questions and dispel rumors
 - Provide necessary information; follow the lead of and respond to student questions.
 - Don't give excessive details that could be further traumatizing.
 - Prepare students for how difficult it is to not have all the answers and not know "why" it happened. Caution them that in the absence of answers there may be a tendency to blame or spread rumors.
3. Prepare students for the reactions that may follow crisis exposure.
 - Describe common crisis reactions (See "Possible Reactions to a Crisis Event", page 26 in Quick Reference Guide)
 - Normalize: "These are normal reactions of normal people to an abnormal situation."
4. Teach students how to manage crisis reactions
 - Discuss coping strategies, i.e., maintaining regular eating and sleeping routines, avoiding drugs/alcohol, spending time with supportive friends/family, etc.
 - Develop personal care plans.
5. Inform students of resources for support.
 - Counseling services available on campus
 - Community resources (See page 5 in Quick Reference Guide)

Referrals

If the group leader notices students who may need further evaluation and support, refer them to appropriate services on campus as soon as possible.

Psychological First Aid Intervention

Psychological first aid is an intervention for individuals or groups who are significantly impacted by a crisis. The intervention is offered by a mental health professional in a confidential setting, typically within 24-72 hours of the crisis event, and is designed to help individuals understand the crisis event and their reactions to it. They are given an opportunity to share their stories fully and to develop coping strategies and identify supports that will help them return to their normal activities.

- Groups should be homogenous (based on naturally occurring groupings or level of exposure). It is important to not pair individuals who have close physical or emotional proximity to the event with those who had minimal exposure.
- Participation in these sessions should be voluntary.
- Individuals should be given ample time to share their stories without time constraints. This process should not be rushed.
- This may be the first step in working with traumatized individuals, however it should never be used as a stand-alone intervention and further referrals may be necessary.

Outline

- 1) Introduce the Session
 - Introduce the facilitators
 - Describe the purpose, process, and steps of the session.
 - Establish group rules
- 2) Answer questions and dispel rumors
 - Provide necessary information, but not details that could be further traumatizing.
 - View carefully selected/screened media presentations.
- 3) Share Stories
 - Ask for volunteers.
 - Give each student a chance to share.
 - Engage students in developmentally appropriate art activities.
 - Do not rush the process
- 4) Share Reactions
 - Teach common crisis reactions
 - Give each student a chance to share.
 - Mention self-referral procedures.
- 5) Empower the individuals
 - Teach stress management.
 - Identify accessible supports.
 - Reinforce adaptive coping (e.g. exercise, journal writing) and offer alternatives for maladaptive strategies.
- 6) Close the Session
 - Prepare students for funeral attendance.

- Supervise memorial development.
- Create cards and write letters.
- Summarize what has been learned.
- Reiterate self-referral procedures