

Administrators

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Trauma and Death: Roles for School Personnel

There are a number of roles that should be performed by key personnel. It is important to recognize that each person has his or her own unique history with regard to crisis and loss. It is now unusual for old issues to resurface. Each student should be given permission to feel a range of emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel. **Typically, individuals go through a sequence of emotional reactions following a crisis: 1) high anxiety, 2) denial, 3) anger, 4) remorse, 5) grief and 6) reconciliation.**

Principal's Role

- Direct intervention efforts
- Be visible, available, supportive and empower staff
- Provide direction to teachers about how much to set aside the curriculum
- Tests should be postponed in some classes
- Communicate with central administration and other affected schools
- Contact family of the deceased
- Inform staff and students about funeral arrangements
- Ensure that memorials are appropriate

Counselor's/ School Psychologist's/ Social Worker's Role

- Be available
- Cancel other activities
- Locate counseling assistance (check community resources)
- Provide individual and group counseling
- Contact parents of affected students with suggestions for support or further referral
- Follow the schedule of the deceased and visit classrooms of close friends
- Support the faculty (provide counseling as needed)
- Keep records of affected students and provide follow-up services

Teacher's Role

- Provide accurate information to students
- Lead classroom discussions that focus on helping students to cope with the loss
- Dispel rumors
- Answer questions without providing unnecessary details
- Recognize the varying religious beliefs held by students
- Model an appropriate response
- Give permission for a range of emotions
- Identify students who need counseling and refer to building support personnel
- Provide activities to reduce trauma, such as artwork, music and writing
- Set aside the curriculum as needed
- Discuss funeral procedures

Death: Dealing with Crisis at School

Practical Suggestions for Educators

Background

National statistics indicate that approximately one out of every 1500-2000 students die or is killed each year, with the incidence of deaths being highest for the high school population. The most frequent causes of student deaths are accidents, homicide and suicides. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) statistics from 1994 indicated the following causes of deaths among young people under age twenty: 4000 motor vehicle deaths 4000 homicides 3800 suicides.

The CDC statistics also indicate that approximately 50 homicides or suicides happened on school grounds or on the way to school in 1995.

Unfortunately, at some time all educators will deal with the death of a student or colleague. It is then essential that school personnel prepare in advance so that they can respond in a timely and supportive manner that leads to constructive resolution for all students and staff.

Notification and Announcement Procedures

Get the facts! Verification is very important and administrators should contact the family of the deceased and/or authorities to get the facts before providing post-vention. Give everyone the facts as quickly as possible to dispel rumors. Please verify that the student or staff member is deceased and not being maintained on life support systems. Age-appropriate language should be used.

Acceptable sources of verification are:

- School personnel who witnessed the death notification from the family of the deceased.
- Notification from law enforcement agency.

Get help! **USE THE PROTOCOL.** Contact the key district administrators for assistance, and do so as quickly as possible. The administrators will also be helpful in interacting with the media. If the death was a suicide, it is essential that central administrators have input into post-vention planning.

Establish a calling tree: A calling tree should be utilized to notify district level personnel as well as building staff in the location where the deceased attended or worked. The calling tree can be used to notify all school personnel that a faculty meeting will be held before school to outline post-vention plans. If the death occurs during non-school hours or during vacations, this process allows staff members to work through their own issues before they assist their students.

Death: Determine the Degree of Trauma

The following questions will help the administrator anticipate the amount of emotional trauma:

- Who was the person and were they a long-time popular member of the school?
- What happened? Murder and suicide are unexpected and violent, and thus more difficult to deal with than, for example, a death from a serious illness.
- Where did the death occur? A death that occurs on school grounds more difficult to deal with. It is important to find out who witnessed the death and provide them with counseling. Students may also reflect concerns with personal safety.
- What other tragedies have impacted this particular school recently? The latest death will cause other unresolved issues to surface for both staff and students.
- Who was the perpetrator? If the person believed to be responsible for the death is also a member of your school community, it adds to the emotionality.

Death: Occurring at School

- Hand deliver a memorandum to all teachers. **SAMPLE LETTERS are included in this binder (see sample letters.)**
The most frequent recommendation is to give all teachers the facts about the tragedy and instructions to share the information with their students, as well as suggestions for assisting students. This memo can also invite all staff to a faculty meeting after school. The majority of students should stay in their classroom. Only those closest to the victim or those with tragic life situations of their own should be sent to the school support personnel.
- Use the public announcement system. The administrator is urged to carefully plan and rehearse what he/she will say. Choice of words, voice tone and inflection are very important and set the tone for the management of the tragedy.

Parent Notification

It is very important to inform the parents of students at the school affected by the death that a death has occurred. There is a balance between providing enough information to dispel rumors and protecting the privacy of the deceased. It is recommended that a fact sheet or letter be sent to parents, either by mail or sent home via students. This letter, in most cases, would not contain the name of the deceased, especially when the death involves a student. The name would be used in communications within the school to the faculty and in most cases with the students. The letter sent home would contain a brief description of the cause of death when the facts are known, but would avoid unnecessary details.

School personnel, especially those, who have direct contact with parents either by phone or in person, should be given specific directions about appropriate information to share regarding the death. The letter to parents should encourage them to focus on the needs of their child and not on specific information about the deceased. The letter should clarify what types of services are available at school to help their child cope with the tragedy. The superintendent or his designee prior to distribution should review this letter.

Death: Not Occurring at School

Incidents involving awareness of impending death (cancer, illness, injury):

- Talk to student / staff member when knowledge of impending death is known
 - ~ Determine facts
 - ~ Determine if they want the knowledge to be public now — or later
 - ~ Ask who they would like to advise them if notice of the death arrives at school
 - ~ Ask who they would like to have with them if they become aware of the death while at school -staff / faculty / students
 - ~ Ask what they would like to have done, i.e. quiet room for students and staff, etc.
 - ~ Ask who else at school would be affected so that they can be advised and allowed a place in the special rooms
- Advise members of the Crisis Intervention Response Team of an approaching event
- Designate one person from the Team / school to be in contact with person and family to determine their needs and wishes - also to maintain regular contact with them
- Decide what locations will be available for use
- Advise Kitchen to be prepared to provide water and juice

When advised of a death:

- Verify the information that the death has occurred
- Notify Administration and Team members
- Prepare the designated room and designate primary Team member to stay in the room
 - ~ Arrange with kitchen for the water and juice
 - ~ Provide tissues
 - ~ Other materials as maybe needed for the situation
- Make notification to the person(s) directly affected
- Make notification to others as designated

Move to Crisis Intervention Response Checklist:

Follow those procedures including the following:

- General notification to school staff — be sure to include on message whether this is to be advised to all students or not
- Confer with family of those directly affected to determine their needs and wishes

Other Considerations:

- Maintain Grief Center
- Obtain funeral and other pertinent information — have that information disseminated to staff and students
- Consider having Staff Inservice: Death and Grieving Stages, Holding classroom discussions, Dealing with loss, Stress debriefing for staff
- Assist students in preparing a memorial service at school if situation dictates
- **Determine if there are students or staff who may be especially affected by event due to prior personal experiences — consider this in pre-planning if possible but always during the event**

Death: Suicide

If the death was a suicide, post-vention procedures outlined by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) should be followed, in addition to the recommendations mentioned previously.

The tasks of post-vention are:

- 1) to reduce the chances of anyone else committing suicide by avoiding glamorization of the deceased and**
- 2) to assist staff and students with the grieving process.**

Post-vention activities provide an opportunity to teach students the warning signs of suicide so that further suicides can be prevented. It is also important that school personnel receive training to recognize symptoms of depression and warnings of suicide ideation among students well before a crisis occurs. The main recommendations of the AAS include:

- Don't dismiss school or encourage funeral attendance during school hours without evaluation of circumstances
- Don't dedicate a memorial to the deceased
- Don't have a large school assembly
- Do give the facts to the students
- Do emphasize prevention and everyone's role
- Do provide individual and group counseling
- Do emphasize that no one is to blame for the suicide
- Do emphasize that help is available and that there are alternatives to suicide
- Do contact the family of the deceased

Suicide: Taking Threats Seriously

The most important sign is to take a child or teen seriously if he or she says, "I want to kill myself," or "I'm going to commit suicide." Asking a child or adolescent whether he or she is depressed or thinking about suicide can be helpful. Rather than "putting thoughts in the child's head," such a question will provide assurance that somebody cares and will give the young person the chance to talk about problems with an expert.

There are many strategies that can be taken by school personnel to deal with potential suicide problems. The National School Safety Center listed these suggestions in its November 1992 School Safety Update that can be used by school psychologists:

- Establish policies and procedures. Safety of students is of primary importance. Therefore, guidelines should specify the necessary steps to take when learning of potential danger. Responsibility requires action.
- Provide training for all staff regarding suicide warning signs and school procedures. This training can take place during scheduled in-service meetings. Include information on suicide statistics, an explanation of the need for training, suicide myths, appropriate and inappropriate staff conduct, school board policy regarding suicidal behavior and confidentiality.
- Designate the persons who act upon suicide referrals. Additional training will be necessary for those who receive the reports of at-risk students. Each school plan should include some aspect of the following: confidentiality, interviewing techniques for dealing with the at-risk student, dealing with the parents alone and the parents with the student, presenting professional assistance plans to parents and students, and offering school support to the whole family.
- Contact treatment agencies. In crisis situations, a previously prepared list of resources is invaluable. Knowing what services are provided costs, insurance requirements, admission policies and waiting periods will enable the school staff to save time.

- Develop a support program for threats and attempts. The student will remain at risk for some time after an attempt. The first three to six months is the most critical time, although some remain at heightened risk of suicide for at least two years. Often a completed suicide occurs just when the family and community feel that “things are beginning to return to normal. “Programs that ease the return to school and regularly monitor the student, without causing embarrassment, will enhance the student’s chances of receiving further help if needed.
- Identify contributory sources of student pain in the school environment. Honest assessment of the school environment may reveal areas or policies that cause inordinate amounts of stress to many students. Adjustments rather than lack of action are indicated.

Suicide: Crisis Response Strategies

Despite good efforts, sometimes a student will commit suicide. Schools need to be prepared to deal with the tragedy. The National School Safety Center (1992) suggests that students and staff be told of a suicide when information is confirmed. Fully informed teachers should announce the news in classrooms. Discussion will ensue; suicide as a solution to problems should not be glorified.

Some upset students will want to go home. A caretaker should be notified to come to school to escort the student. School should not be dismissed, nor the schedule changed. The staff also should be made aware of the potential for contagion or suicide clusters, and to be especially sensitive to talk about suicide.

Support for those close to the deceased will be needed. The survivors of suicide frequently feel guilt and anger as well as grief. They may be asking themselves how they could have intervened — with a phone call or by winning more trust from the deceased. Feelings must be expressed and counseling will help the survivors' understanding.

Some students and staff will want to attend the memorial service, and this should be allowed. But both the National School Safety Center and Richard Lieberman, school psychologist and consultant to the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Suicide Prevention Unit, agree that no memorial service should be held at the school because it places the deceased student in the position of being a role model.

“When children think about suicide they are not thinking clearly. It is not a far stretch for a child who sees a beautiful tree, a yearbook dedication or a memorial plaque to imagine he or she will receive such attention in death,” Lieberman said. “This precedent could confuse a child who at such a young age does not understand the permanence of death.”

There are many people alive today who were suicidal at one time in their lives. Students should be encouraged to talk about feelings that could lead to suicide and to “save friends” by reporting plans their peers may have for such a disastrous event. A large part of the solution is to educate school administrators, psychologists, counselors, teachers, parents, families and friends on the prevention, intervention and post-vention techniques now available. But most of all, everyone involved must be supportive and ready to listen.

What the School Can Do:

Memorials, activities, and rituals following traumatic events (except in the case of suicides):

School memorials, ceremonies or memory activities following a traumatic experience serve an important function in the healing process for both students and staff. Such activities provide the opportunity to express emotions through a variety of ways besides talking. In addition, a school memorial helps to bring closure to a period of grieving and serves as a point from which to move on with regular school activities. Memorial activities can take many forms, from tree planting or writing letters and cards, to more traditional “services.” It is best to plan a variety of activities rather than only one “big” event; some students will be more comfortable, and more comforted by, one activity versus another. Providing a range of opportunities to express feelings is essential. Memorial activities following a large-scale traumatic event such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon have a somewhat different focus compared to memorials following a student or staff death or even multiple deaths following a school shooting or natural disaster. “Closure” may be difficult to achieve, even after several weeks, due to ongoing fear that the situation may recur or that traumatic events, such as war, may take place. In this situation, a significant purpose of a memorial activity is to bring people together in order to express feelings and concerns together -to reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability. A further purpose is to encourage everyone to think about ways - even very small steps - that can be taken to increase feelings of security and reduce conflicts that can lead to violence at all levels.

Planning school memorial activities:

Participation in memorial activities is important even when students or school personnel do not know any of the victims or their families. The following are key points for schools to consider:

- Proceed slowly and involve students, staff, families, and the community in your planning and decision-making. Remember the planning and construction of the memorial in Oklahoma City for the victims of the bombing of the Federal Building took five years.
- Schools should form a committee that includes administrators, teachers, parents and students to plan memorial activities. It is very important to involve students in the planning process including those who had personal ties to the victims if possible.
- Memorial events can be planned as a series of activities, not just the more traditional permanent marker or structure in memory of those who died. Schools can hold group “services” as well as involve classrooms in creating their own tributes, artwork, cards, and letters, etc.
- Memorial activities - at least the initial activity - should take place within one week of the event if possible.

Specific Guidelines for School Memorial Services:

- Involve students of all ages in planning the service.
- Keep the memorial service brief and appropriate to the age of the students. For elementary students, 15-20 minutes is appropriate; for older students, up to an hour.
- Include music and student performances. Playing soothing music as people enter and leave the service will help set and maintain a calm mood.
- Preview the service with students, parents and staff ahead of time. Teachers should help students anticipate how this will be different from typical school assemblies, and should discuss appropriate behavior.
- Have several brief speakers. Select individuals who are well known to students and who represent security and safety - people who students can recognize as able to provide reassurances and support (mayor, superintendent, local police chief or school liaison officer, etc.)
- Invite family members to attend.
- For memorial services/programs, all staff and students should attend (unless parents specifically object). Such programs can be very powerful in uniting the school community, and send the message that each individual is important. If some students choose to not attend, provide a quiet activity as an alternative.
- Involve classrooms by inviting them to bring and hang a class banner or poster to honor the victims or promote a safer future.
- Use symbols of life and hope in memorial activities. Balloons and candles can be used very effectively to promote a positive, uplifting message that acknowledges pain and sadness yet also is hopeful for the future.
- Following a school-wide memorial service, students should return to their classrooms for at least a short time prior to dismissal. This allows time to talk with each other, their teacher or a mental health staff member (if available) to “debrief” the experience.

Suggested Memorial Activities:

- A temporary memorial site can be established. Flowers, notes, poems, ribbons, stuffed animals, pictures and other objects can be brought by students and staff to a designated location at school to pay tribute to those who died and those who helped to rescue survivors. School and community input should be obtained to determine if a more permanent place for these objects is feasible or to otherwise determine an appropriate, sensitive way to dismantle the memorial site. The location of permanent memorials at school should be considered very carefully and locations other than main entrances are recommended.

- Schools and communities who have experienced significant traumas often look for what is termed as “the gift of hope”; i.e., activities and projects that will make a difference and prevent similar tragedies in the future. In the context of the September 2001 attacks on our country, activities and curriculum that address tolerance and bullying would be appropriate “gifts.”
- Writing activities can be particularly helpful for students of all ages. Students can write and send cards, letters and posters sent to be sent to the families of the victims (in care of a support organization such as the Red Cross), to those involved in rescue work (police and fire personnel), to businesses that lost significant numbers of personnel, etc. Older students might also write to local, state or national leaders.
- Be sure to involve all students, including those with disabilities. Activities can be tailored to the cognitive and emotional development levels of all students. Special education staff can be helpful in assuring that all students feel included and that activities are appropriate for them.

Developmental considerations:

Memorial activities should be planned to be appropriate to the developmental level of students involved.

- Young children need to do something to express their grief, even though they may not really understand all that has happened. Drawings - to hang up in the school hallway, to send to the firemen and policemen who helped victims, to send to school children in the disaster areas - are an excellent way for young children to express and share their feelings. They can also perform songs or reading of poems as part of a school-wide memorial service.
- Adolescents need activities that provide them with a sense of contribution to the school and community’s efforts, not only in recognition of the event and honoring the victims, but also in preventing such tragedies in the future. Involve middle school and high school students in all aspects of planning memorial activities, including performing as well as helping with setting up and cleaning up; gather their suggestions for prevention of such events - such as ideas about improving security (locally or more globally) and increasing tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Students might be encouraged to write members of Congress or appropriate agencies with their suggestions. Older students might also benefit from studying the political and religious issues that might help explain the origins of the hatred and fanaticism that led to these attacks.

Follow-up activities:

Particularly following events that will have no real closure for an extended time (i.e., because recovery efforts will be slow, because identification of the perpetrators may not be resolved quickly, because the impact of the event has long-term consequences, etc.), it is important for schools to consider an activity to address ongoing concerns.

Schools might consider:

- Linking with other community efforts (such as food drives or other donation activities to children and families displaced by the attacks)
- Establishing and implementing conflict resolution, tolerance and other instructional programs that have long-term prevention goals
- Building a permanent memorial or establishing an ongoing memorial “fund” for disaster relief for current and future tragedies.

For further information on promoting tolerance among children and youth, contact The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) at (301) 657-0270 or visit NASP’s website at www.nasponline.org.

Crisis Intervention: Follow-up Activities

Following a crisis, staff, students and team members often feel exhausted and wish things could just return to “normal.” The community of the school, however, has frequently been permanently affected both by the loss and by the experience of witnessing the grief of the students. It is critical that school personnel recognize the long-term impact of a death or disaster and provide support for both staff and students. Discipline problems often result from grief/loss issues which students do not deal with during follow-up.

One to two weeks following the incident:

For Staff:

- Convene the School Crisis Response Team to discuss and evaluate the event. Invite all persons who participated in the event, including outside building counselors such as Youth Services and Center for Grief and Loss of Hospice Caring Project who assisted. Create a Safe Room: a room where grieving students can gather and counselors can offer support services. Someone who is trained but was not part of the intervention should lead this debriefing activity.
- Provide at least one session with the entire staff to review grief dynamics and allow staff to share their feelings
- Review the crisis response plan and how it worked

For Students:

- Identify individual students who need follow-up counseling
- Establish drop-in support groups within the school, using the Safe Room, during lunch
- Form a six to eight week grief support group
- Introduce grief and loss materials into the curriculum
- Recognize that follow-up may need to continue for weeks/ months.

Trauma Related Stress: Warning Signs

Individuals who have experienced a traumatic event oftentimes suffer psychological Stress related to the incident. In most instances, these are normal reactions to abnormal situations. Individuals who feel they are unable to regain control of their lives, or who experience the following symptoms for more than a month, should consider seeking outside professional mental health assistance.

The symptoms to watch out for:

- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.
- Having trouble sleeping or changes in appetite.
- Experiencing anxiety and fear, especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma.
- Being on edge, being easily startled or becoming overly alert.
- Feeling depressed, sad and having low energy.
- Experiencing memory problems including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma.
- Feeling “scattered” and unable to focus on work or daily activities.
- Having difficulty making decisions.
- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.
- Feeling emotionally “numb,” withdrawn, disconnected or different from others.
- Spontaneously crying, feeling a sense of despair and hopelessness.
- Feeling extremely protective of, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.
- Not being able to face certain aspects of the trauma, and avoiding activities, places, or even people that remind you of the event.