

## **TRAUMATIC EVENTS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HELPING STUDENTS COPE**

**Explain the episode or event as clearly as possible using age-appropriate language and materials.** Try not to dwell on the event, but answer students' questions truthfully giving them as much information as you feel is appropriate.

**Reassure students that they are safe and that responsible adults are in control.**

Although in cases of school or community violence, you as the teacher might feel unsafe or distressed, it is important to try to give students a sense of security following a significant traumatic event. It is ok to let students see that you are upset by an event, but remind them that you are there to protect them.

**Let students know that the event was not their fault.** Following a traumatic event it is not uncommon for young students to feel that something they did caused the tragedy. Reassure them that they are not to blame.

**Allow students time to talk about their feelings.** Don't ignore the event in class. Instead, let students talk about their emotions either in a large group, small group, or one-on-one setting as appropriate.

**Encourage students to express their emotions.** Journal writing can be a helpful activity for older students to encourage them to come to terms with their feelings surrounding the event. Art or play therapy can be used with younger students to allow them to sort out complex feelings.

**Validate students' feelings.** Let them know that it is normal to feel upset, worried, or anxious when a disastrous event occurs.

**Be sensitive to individual and cultural differences in students and adolescents.** It is important to remember that all students are unique and will react to traumatic events in their own ways. Respect individual differences and don't force students to discuss the event or to return to normal classroom routines before they are ready.

**Be aware that exposure to a traumatic event may cause students and adolescents to exhibit regressive behavior.** Be prepared to deal with regressive behavior without criticizing students for acting "babyish."

**Allow students time to be sad.** Don't try too hard to artificially cheer students up following a traumatic event. Allow them to cry if necessary and reassure them that they are allowed to be upset. Do not expect them to be "brave" or "tough."

**When you feel the timing is right, try to restore a sense of normalcy by returning to regular routines.** Once students have had time to talk over the event and to ask questions and express concerns, try to get the class back to their pre-trauma routine.

**Give students opportunities to feel that they have some control.** Allow students to make some decisions regarding classroom activities so that they can feel that they have some sense of control again. Let them choose how to spend free time, or when to do a certain activity.

**Teach students stress management strategies.** Encourage students to use age-appropriate methods for managing anxiety such as dramatic play or physical exercise.

**Avoid exposing student to stimuli that will cause them to re-live the event.** Encourage parents to limit their students' exposure to graphic media depictions of the event.

**Communicate with parents.** Send notes home, make phone calls, or hold parent meetings to keep caregivers informed about how you are dealing with the event in class and how students are reacting. Keep parents updated on how their students are coping following the trauma and encourage an open dialogue between the family and the school.

**Take care of yourself!** Make time to sort out your own feelings and to seriously consider how you personally are reacting to the event. Seek help from co-workers and mental health professionals so that you will be in a better position to help your students.

#### **Additional Resources:**

*Helping students and adolescents cope with violence and disaster.* (2001).

Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Health.

*Helping students cope with disaster and terrorism.* (2002). Washington, DC:

American Psychological Association.

<http://helping.apa.org/daily/ptguidelines.html>: Reactions and Guidelines for Students Following Trauma/Disaster.

[www.actagainstviolence.com/materials/publications/act/trauma.pdf](http://www.actagainstviolence.com/materials/publications/act/trauma.pdf): When Students Experience Trauma – A Guide for Parents and Families.

[www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm): Helping Students and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters.

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