Helping students and staff cope with crisis and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Outline

• National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
• Prioritizing Tier 1 supports
• Helping children cope with the pandemic
• Supporting grieving students during the pandemic
• Staff support and professional self-care
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Initial Funding: September 11th Children’s Fund & National Philanthropic Trust
Current Support: New York Life Foundation

- Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
- Enhance training in professional education programs
- Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no cost to the school
Through a transdisciplinary team of medical, mental health, and school professionals, the NCSCB provides:

- Confidential on-site/remote technical assistance and consultation for school leadership and professionals
- Practical, timely advice via 24/7 toll-free number and email
- Ongoing support in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and throughout the long-term recovery period
- Educational resources and crisis management tools
- School staff training and community presentations; professional development for range of professional audiences
Prioritizing Tier 1 supports

- **Target/Intensive**
  - High-Risk Factors
  - Individual Interventions
    - (~5% of students)

- **Selected**
  - At-Risk Factors
  - Classroom & Small-Group Strategies
    - (~15% of students)

- **Universal**
  - ALL Students
  - School/Class-Wide, Culturally Responsive Systems of Support
    - (~80% of students)
Effects of the World Trade Center Attack on NYC Public School Students

- 6 months after 9-11-01
- Applied Research and Consulting, LLC, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and NY State Psychiatric Institute
- Over 8,000 students grades 4-12
- Self-reports of current mental health problems and impairment in functioning
- “Probable psychiatric disorder” if reported symptoms consistent with diagnostic criteria AND impairment in functioning
Prevalence of probable psychiatric disorders

- One of four met criteria for one or more of probable psychiatric disorders
- Approximately one out of ten had: PTSD (11%), major depressive disorder (8%), separation anxiety disorder (12%), and panic attacks (9%)
- 15% had agoraphobia
Adjustment problems nearly universal

- 87% reported PTSD symptom 6 months later
  - 76% often thinking about attack
  - 45% trying to avoid thinking, hearing, or talking about it
  - 25% harder to keep mind on things
  - 24% problems sleeping
  - 17% nightmares
  - 18% stopped going to places or doing things that reminded them
  - 11% at least 6 symptoms → probable PTSD
- 2/3 had not sought any mental health services
Psychological First Aid

• Provide broadly to those impacted
• Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
• All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope
Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress.
Talking with and supporting children

- Don’t pretend everything is OK – children pick up when parents/adults are not genuine and honest
- Children may pick up on concerns primarily of adults
- Provide appropriate reassurance, but don’t give false reassurance
- Find out individual child’s fears, concerns, skepticism
- Don’t tell children that they shouldn’t be worried; help them learn to deal with their uncertainty and fear
- Include positive information; present a hopeful perspective
Strategies for dealing with distress

• Reading or hobbies that promote healthy distraction
• Journaling, blogging, art, music to promote expressions of feelings
• Exercise, yoga
• Appropriate use of respectful humor
• Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, self-hypnosis and guided imagery
• Cognitive behavioral therapy

Help children identify steps they can take personally to protect their own health and to help others
Some children may need more assistance

• The pandemic and discussion about the impact on families may remind children of other difficulties – events in the past, ongoing challenges, or concerns about future losses or crises
• Children who were anxious or depressed before the pandemic will likely need more support
• Children may need to focus first on their own needs before they are able to think of needs of others; try not to make them feel guilty for thinking about how this crisis impacts them personally
Watch your media consumption

• Make sure it is a healthy diet; don’t consume too much
• Keep informed through focused/periodic attention to trusted sources of information
• If you aren’t getting reassured or learning practical actions to take, then disconnect from media
• Limit amount of media exposure – this is a good time to unplug and connect instead with children and family
Grief during a pandemic

• After a death, children often concerned about the health of themselves or others close to them
  – Important to help children deal with fears/concerns about the pandemic

• Physical distancing measures including school closure increase social isolation and makes it difficult to provide support

• Secondary losses become even more of an issue

• Family members may be overwhelmed by the pandemic as well as their own grief
Grief during a pandemic (continued)

- Children may experience more than one personal loss; deaths may impact the entire school community
- Some grief may not be related to death
- Grieving students often experience at least temporary academic difficulties; so do children during a crisis
- Supporting grieving students can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times
What you are doing is of value

• Just because we don’t know everything, doesn’t mean we know nothing of value
• You know strategies that have helped in the past to decrease distress – try them now
• Reach out to colleagues/resources in school district and community when more is critically needed
• Celebrate positive contributions you make
• Set reasonable expectations
• The curriculum has changed – teaching children how to cope → helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient
Supporting those in need can be gratifying

• Exposure to trauma and suffering of others can contribute to vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue, and burnout

• Need to have:
  – realistic objectives of purpose of interactions
  – skills and resources to provide meaningful assistance
  – awareness of and sufficient support to deal with personal impact of work

• Especially difficult during a pandemic when you have other challenges
Support for Staff

• Organizational support
  – Substitute teachers and additional support staff
  – Modify workload, expectations, schedule
  – Supportive supervision
  – Professional Development
  – Employee Assistance Program

• Family and peer support
Challenges to self-care

- Making time when there is so much to do and everyone needs your help
- Feeling shame or guilt for attending to your own needs
- Assuming others are having less trouble adjusting
- Lack of modeling of professional self-care
Challenges for leadership after a crisis

• No matter what you do, or how well you do it, you won’t be able to make everything ok
• Those impacted by a crisis often react to feeling out of control by trying to exert more control
• People will have very different views about what should be done and feel strongly about those views
  – Safety
  – Timeline for returning to academic focus
  – Commemoration and memorialization
  – Use of funds
• Reactions can challenge working relationships
• You can’t stop and focus just on recovery
THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL CRISIS AND BEREAVEMENT

Dedicated to helping schools support their students through crisis and loss

I Need Help Now

Help Me Prepare
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)
Supporting Organizational Members
www.grievingstudents.org

Order Free Materials (download)

After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.
For further information about NCSCB visit us, call us, like us, share us

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