

Coping with Traumatic Events

Special Comments for Teachers and School Personnel

1. Talk about these events in class in factual and focused ways. It is appropriate to talk about these events in the classroom. But it is not appropriate to turn each class into an unstructured group therapy session. There should be open, honest, and accurate discussion in classes that is directed and contained by a teacher. Once this initial period of grief has subsided, try to keep discussions focused on aspects relevant to the content of your curriculum. You should not ignore it: children never benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' But your students will be better served if they take an aspect of this and discuss it in focused, thoughtful and rationale ways. In history talk about extremism in other key world events; in Social Studies talk about various cultural religious views of death. Now, this does not mean you should ignore the emotional impact of this; just don't feel that you have to become an expert in trauma psychology to help your students.

2. Find out what the children think and feel. An important first step in talking about this event is to find out what the children think and feel. Many of the children will have distorted information. Young children, for example, often make false assumptions about the causes of major events. These distortions can magnify his sense of fear and make him more likely to have persisting emotional or behavioural problems. Correct misperceptions with accurate but age-appropriate explanations.

3. Don't over focus on these events: resume normal patterns of activity at school as soon as possible. In the immediate post-event period, children and adults often over-focus on traumatic events. The horror of this event, the pervasive media coverage and the many discussions can actually saturate a child's capacity to process and move forward in a healthy way. Make the class room a safe place to get some structured relief from this emotional barrage. By focusing on school work, a child's over-worked stress-response systems can get a little rest period.

4. Take a child's lead on when, what and how much to say. After you have some sense of what your students know, and you have clarified any distortions, let them take the lead during your informal discussions about this topic. Students may ask you many difficult questions, "How long can you live if you are trapped like that?" You do not need to be too detailed or comprehensive in your answers. If you let children direct unstructured discussions by their questions – you will find that you will have many, many short discussions and not one "big" talk. These little discussions make it easier for students to digest this huge emotional meal.

5. Don't feel that you have to have all the answers. Some aspects of this will forever remain beyond understanding. You can explain that you just don't know – and that sometimes we will never know why some things happen. And that you we all learn to live with some unknowns. When you share your struggles with the child, their own struggles become easier.

6. Reassure the children about safety. Many children – and many adults - are frightened. Reassure your students. Your home and community are safe.

7. Inform parents and children about the risks of children watching too much media coverage. Watching the images of this over and over only won't help child. In fact, it may make this worse for them. Young children are very vulnerable to this. Tell children and parents to limit their viewing of the media coverage with explicit images. Ultimately, the goal is to decrease the traumatic power of these images and that is very difficult when the images permeate the media.

8. Anticipate increased behavioural and emotional problems and decreased capacity to learn. When children feel overwhelmed, confused, sad or fearful, they will often "regress." And so do adults. You may see a variety of symptoms in your students: these include anxiety (or fearfulness), sadness, difficulty concentrating, sleep problems, increased impulsivity or aggression. These symptoms are usually short-term (days or weeks) and tend to resolve with reassurance, patience and nurturing. When children feel safe, they will be most likely start to "act their age."

9. Some children will be more vulnerable than others. Not all children will react to these events in the same way. Some children may seem disinterested and no changes in their behaviours will be noticed. Other children may have profound symptoms that seem out of proportion to their real connection to these events. We can not predict how a given child will react but we do know that children with pre-existing mental health or behavioural problems are more likely to show symptoms. We also know that the closer a child is to the actual traumatic event (i.e., if a loved one was injured or killed) the more severe and persisting the symptoms will be. The high-risk children in your class are high risk for having increased problems following this event.

10. Your reactions will influence children's reactions. Children sense emotionally intensity around them and will mirror the emotional responses and interpretations of important adults in their life. That includes their teachers. Younger child will try to please you – sometimes by avoiding emotional topics if they sense that it may upset you. Try to gauge your own reactions. If you find yourself crying or being very emotional, it is fine. Just make sure that you try to tell your students why you cried. It is reassuring to children to know they are not alone with their feelings. Make sure they hear, many times, that even though it may be upsetting it is still important to share feelings and thoughts with each other.

11. Don't let anger be misdirected. A major mistake following these events would be to let hate win. Don't let the frustration, anger and rage that this event produces to be misdirected.

12. Don't hesitate to get more advice and help. If you feel overwhelmed or if you see persisting problems with your students don't hesitate to reach out for help. In most communities there are professionals and organizations that can answer your questions and provide the services your students need.

Information taken from article by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Dr. Perry an internationally-recognized authority on children in crisis. In addition, Dr. Perry serves as the Senior Fellow of the ChildTrauma Academy. Both a clinician and a researcher, Dr. Perry has been consulted on many high-profile incidents involving traumatized children including the Branch Davidian siege in Waco and the Oklahoma bombing.

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