



ARTICLE

When Bad Things Are Happening

When news breaks of disaster or violence, your students may want to discuss a crisis as it unfolds. Here's how.

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Illustration by Michael Morgenstern

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We know that as news of a crisis makes its way into your classroom, both you and your students may need support figuring out how to respond. Here are a few suggestions for navigating a discussion with students as news unfolds.

These recommendations build on the Psychological First Aid (PFA) framework, developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security: “Listen, Protect, Connect—Model & Teach,” They also include suggestions from the American School Counselor Association and The Child Mind Institute.

Step 1: Listen.

Do not quiet or dismiss students who want to talk about what's happening. This is an issue of immediate importance, and it will occupy their minds whether you discuss it in class or not. Set aside the time necessary to catch them up on the news available to you, and debrief.

Let students express their feelings, share their experiences and vent. Consider letting them journal, draw or consider their reaction privately, as well. Give students time and space to react if they need it.

Step 2: Protect.

Misinformation always spreads rapidly after a crisis. Encourage a critical eye toward breaking news. If a shooting is involved, there may be fake profiles of the shooter meant to cater to stereotypes. No matter what's happened, there will likely be differing reports. Look for trustworthy sources and remain skeptical. Deal in facts and big ideas; avoid speculation. Don't let students watch nonstop, uninterrupted footage of the crisis.

Do your best to make students feel safe. Be honest, but remain calm. Organize the discussion as you would any discussion: Remember class routine, classroom contracts and community agreements. Keep control, even in this moment of interruption.

And remember to be aware of students who may be managing trauma or those whose lives have been touched by violence. Keep an eye on students, monitor reactions and recognize that trauma can manifest in a variety of behaviors, including anger and disengagement.

Step 3: Model.

Help students translate feelings of hopelessness into opportunities to respond with productive action. Join them in brainstorming ways they could support survivors and families experiencing this trauma.

Step 4: Take care of yourself.

Educators bear a heavy burden in trying to protect and support their students. Check in with your own feelings. And know that we have your back.

Editor's Note: This story was updated in January of 2021.

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