

Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators

Traumatic events such as a natural disaster; school violence; traumatic death of an educator or peer can impact students' learning, behavior, and relationships. Here are some reactions you might see and how you can help.

Keep in mind, not all students will feel the same way.

| STUDENTS WANT YOU TO KNOW THEY MAY: | YOU CAN HELP WHEN YOU: |
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| 1. Feel sad, scared, empty, or numb. Younger students may be clingy. Older students may be embarrassed to show their distress, and may hide their feelings or share more on social media. | 1. Provide support by listening to concerns and feelings. Educate students about different trauma reactions. Don't assume all students feel the same or need help but try to accommodate students' different responses. |
| 2. Have behavior problems that are new or worse (e.g., have outbursts, be irritable, break rules). Some may engage in serious or harmful behaviors (e.g., drug or alcohol abuse, self-injury, or risky sexual behavior). | 2. Have patience with minor behavior problems. Stay calm when setting limits. Return to predictable school routines and activities as soon as possible. <i>Refer students for professional help for any concerns about self-injury or dangerous behaviors.</i> |
| 3. Have trouble concentrating, paying attention, participating, or getting work done on time. | 3. Understand that attention and doing classroom activities may be affected. Focus on the present with gentle reminders about daily tasks. Consider modifying work or providing extra structure and instructions. |
| 4. Appear sleepy or irritable due to having sleep problems. | 4. Realize that sleep difficulties are common and can lead to fatigue and poor participation. Suggest healthy sleep habits (e.g. a break from screens before bed) and calming coping strategies. Consider adjusting deadlines until sleep is stabilized. |
| 5. Have physical trauma reactions like stomach aches, headaches, a pounding heart, body aches, or fast, shallow breathing. | 5. Recognize physical reactions may confuse or scare students, making them even more afraid. Encourage students to use relaxation strategies such as slow breathing, stretching, or physical activity. |
| 6. Startle more easily in response to everyday noises (e.g. a pencil dropping, door slamming, the P.A. system crackling, kids yelling) and become scared. | 6. Identify the sources of everyday noises and that these are not dangerous. Reassure students that they are safe. Explain that physical responses (e.g. feeling startled, tense muscles, fast breathing) are common after a trauma when they are on high alert. Suggest using calming strategies such as slow breathing. |
| 7. Think life is meaningless, or withdraw from family and friends. Even students who are typically outgoing may become withdrawn. They may retreat to social media, gaming or online activities. | 7. Suggest engaging in positive activities (e.g., volunteering, hobbies). Discuss ways to cope with sad feelings and the value of in-person support, talking with family or friends, rather than connecting via media. Discuss ways to support students with other adults they trust. |
| 8. Believe that school isn't safe, that the trauma will recur, or have other negative trauma-related thoughts. Students who think their future will be cut short may react by not studying or skipping school. | 8. Create a sense of safety by returning to normal, predictable routines as soon as possible. Remind them that such events are rare. Point out ways adults make school safe. |
| 9. Feel responsible for not taking action before, during or after the event to prevent or minimize the outcome. They may feel guilty for not being harmed. | 9. Discuss that people did the best they could at the time. Give honest, accurate, and age-appropriate information. Let students know you will tell them the truth. |
| 10. Search the media for information about the event in an attempt to find answers. | 10. Suggest they limit the use of media to maintain balance and perspective. Offer to help find answers to difficult questions. |

If any of these problems interfere with student functioning, find out how to refer them for specialized help. Educators and professionals should also be aware of their own reactions and seek support as needed.