Supporting students at times of crisis and loss

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www.grievingstudents.org
Outline of Presentation

• How to support children after a crisis
  – Symptoms of adjustment reactions
  – Psychological first aid
  – Timeline for adjustment
  – Professional self-care

• Supporting the grieving student
  – Coalition to Support Grieving Students

• Optional: Commemoration and memorialization
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**
PFA Actions (source: American Red Cross)

• Observation or awareness
• Make a connection
• Help people feel comfortable and at ease
• Be kind, calm, & compassionate
• Assist with basic needs
• Listen
• Give realistic reassurance
• Encourage good coping
• Help people connect
• Give accurate and timely information
• Suggest a referral resource
• End the conversation
Basic needs are basic

• UWF (Brief Therapy)
• Need to deal with basic needs before able to address emotional needs
  – Safety, security
  – Food, shelter
  – Communication and reunification with family
• Staff have their own basic needs
  – Crisis plans need to address them as a priority
Potential symptoms of adjustment reactions

- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety and school avoidance
- Anxiety and trauma-related fears
- Difficulties with concentration
- Deterioration in academic performance
- Regression
- Depression; Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities
- Substance abuse
- Somatization
Post-traumatic stress disorder

- Exposure to death, serious injury, or sexual violence
- Re-experiencing traumatic event
  - Recurrent, intrusive, distressing memories
  - Recurrent, distressing dreams
  - Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks); post-traumatic play
- Avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma
- Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
- Increased arousal
  - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
  - Irritability or anger
  - Self-destructive behavior
  - Hypervigilance or exaggerated startle
Range of reactions to crisis

- Wide range of reactions and concerns
  - Not just PTSD
- Bereavement
- Secondary losses and stressors
  - Relocation
  - Loss of peer network
  - Academic failure
  - New social network
  - Financial stresses
  - Parental stress, mental health problems
  - Marital conflict or domestic violence
One crisis uncovers other crises

- Crisis awakens feelings related to pre-existing or past crisis, even if event not related
- Future events can lead to temporary resurgence of feelings
  - Grief triggers
  - Trauma triggers
Chronic trauma and cumulative loss

• Cumulative losses are neither protective nor desensitizing – children don’t get “used to” death of peers
• Students may come to learn adults are unable to establish a safe environment and unprepared to provide assistance
• They may conclude there is little value in seeking such assistance and may appear to show no reactions after a death
• They may turn to peers for support or engage in risky behaviors because they are fearful of their own mortality
What to expect in schools in absence of intervention

- ↑ Absenteeism (school avoidance)
- ↑ Suspensions/expulsions (irritability, social regression, substance abuse)
- ↓ Cognitive functioning and academic achievement (anxiety, ↓ concentration, sleep problems, depression)
- → → ↓ Graduation
- Taking time in schools to help children adjust to disaster and aftermath is essential to promote academic achievement
Parents often underestimate symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness
Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = baseline functioning
B = event
C = vulnerable state
D = usual coping mechanisms fail
E = helplessness, hopelessness
F = improved functioning
G = continued impairment
H = return to baseline
I = post-traumatic growth
Importance of professional self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress
• It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized
• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
Survey of >1200 AFT members

• AFT, New York Life Foundation, Tiller Inc, Hart Research Associates
• 92% reported grief is serious problem that deserves more attention in schools
• Single most important barrier preventing teachers from providing support -- insufficient training and/or professional development
• 93% of classroom teachers never received bereavement training; 3% of schools/districts offer training
Loss is common in the lives of children

• Vast majority of children experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school
• 5% of children experience death of parent by 16
Children may not appear to be grieving

- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
  - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  - be overwhelmed by feelings
  - express grief indirectly through behavior or play
  - Choose to keep their losses private
Often adults say nothing

• Adults are afraid to say the wrong thing, upset children, or make matters worse
• Saying nothing says a lot – it communicates that adults are unconcerned, uncaring, or unable to be of assistance
• Leaves young children confused, older children unsupported, and requires children of all ages to grieve alone
Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset and tolerate unpleasant affect, without trying to change it. Accept reactions while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern
Addressing cultural diversity

• Some people are worried they will say or do the wrong thing because they feel ill informed about another culture

• Although there are differences in cultural practices, the fundamental experience of grief is universal

• When we recognize that there is a range of ways to experience and express grief, we can explore ways to bridge cultural differences in order to help grieving children and families
Supporting children of a different culture

- Ask questions when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual
- Assumptions may result in stereotypes that cloud our perceptions and make us miss opportunities to be helpful
- Approach the family with an open mind and heart
- Help families identify and communicate what is important to them about cultural practices; work with them to find solutions and compromises when realities require modifications in cultural practices
Children’s guilt

• Thought processes limited by:
  – Egocentrism
  – Limited understanding of causality
  – Magical thinking

• Results in guilt
  – Reassure children of lack of responsibility
Misconceptions & literal misinterpretations

• For young children, thought processes are concrete and literal
• Religious explanations can be shared, but should not be only explanation of death
Adolescent bereavement

- Adults assume that because adolescents have ability to think rationally they need no further explanations.
- They assume since adolescents often less amenable to adult guidance, they do not need support.
- In reality, adolescents do, but often left unsupported.
- Parents often rely on adolescent children to provide comfort and take on adult responsibilities.
Provide advice on how to support child

- Funeral attendance
- Be aware of community resources and offer them to families
- Provide follow-up – remember that grieving is long-term
Helpful responses to a grief trigger

• Provide a safe space or an adult the student can talk to
• Set procedures for the student to obtain support
• Let the student call a parent or family member if necessary
• Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse or counselor
• Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings
Anticipating and minimizing triggers

• Holidays are likely to serve as triggers
• Father’s Day is likely to serve as a trigger for a student whose father has died; it can also be upsetting for students whose fathers are otherwise missing in their lives
• Introduce activities in a way that acknowledges this and provides alternatives
• Teachers, with the help of students and families, can anticipate and minimize triggers
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)
Modules Placed into Six Sections

- Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
- Conversation and Support
- Developmental and Cultural Considerations
- Practical Considerations
- Reactions and Triggers
- Professional Preparation and Self-Care
- Crisis and Other Special Circumstances
Additional Resources

• Guidance Documents
  – Practical guidelines developed by the NCSCB on how to respond to the death of a student or staff

• Parent booklet: *After a Loved One dies – How Children Grieve and How to Support Them*

• Articles

• Online Resources
  – Achildingrief.com
After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

USC Social Work
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
University of Southern California
For further information

Toll Free: 877-53-NCSCB (877-536-2722)
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment
Gortimer Gibbons’ Life on Normal Street

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jikz6c84O-Q