

SCHOOL-WIDE MANAGEMENT IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

Because trauma differs fundamentally from grief, the needs of the student body and school-wide management requires specific considerations.

Group hysteria or students “feeding off” each other is not uncommon. Management of contagion depends upon calm leadership and consistency in discipline. This is not a time to make major exceptions regarding expectations of student behavior.

Rumor control requires having one specific person who is clearing and verifying information. Encourage students to take their rumors and thoughts directly to the individual in charge of this process and discourage them from spreading rumors amongst themselves. Assure them you will get back to them with the truth as soon as possible.

Model your belief that action can be taken and is being taken which will bring things back toward homeostasis. Take appropriate steps, keep students informed of these and organize physical (observable) activities which being to address the aftermath. Actions such as immediately having people cleaning up a part of the school damaged in the event signals to students that corrective action is already being taken. This brings about a sense of control.

Students will not go back to learning until they feel safe in the school environment. This includes having the opportunity to talk about their own reactions, knowing that the event is not likely to recur, that the perpetrator has been apprehended, or any other information which might be helpful in creating feelings of safety.

Helping students gain a sense of what is yet to come. The National Organization of Victim Assistance speaks of “predict and prepare”. A key element in what makes events traumatic is that people felt out of control, and that things were not predictable. Do whatever is possible to give people a sense of what is to come.

“Normalize” for people the usual reactions to trauma. It is not unusual for people to have physical, emotional and cognitive symptoms to traumatic events. Often people think they are going crazy or “losing it”. Just knowing that their reactions are not uncommon can make them less apt to feel like the symptoms are just one more sign that things are out of control.

Give students and staff opportunity for putting words to their reactions and fears. Moving the experience from the memory center to the language center of the brain begins to give a sense of mastery over something which has seemed out of control and overpowering. These might be informal times of processing or may be interventions or debriefings held by professionals who have expertise in the field of trauma.

Find the means to allow for personal action. We sometimes feel less immobilized if we are able to take some kind of corrective action, even if it is minimal. Although it may be dangerous for students to be involved in cleaning up debris, there may be other errands or tasks which would be appropriate for them. **Do not have peer helpers or other student organizations be involved in leading the discussions for students.** That is like having the walking wounded help the newly injured. All students need to be supported and not be expected to provide support to others. Besides, these kinds of events are overwhelming to nearly everyone and are beyond the scope of what student self-help program training addresses.