

Responding to a Crisis: Tips for Schools

Anatomy of a Crisis

The stages of a crisis response can be broken down into the following:

- IMMEDIATE NEEDS - The first 72 hours.
- INTERMEDIATE NEEDS - Up to week two.
- LONG-TERM NEEDS - Months and years following the tragedy.



Sustained communication throughout these stages is critical to the continued healing and restoration of the mental health of children and staff.

Taking Action

Being responsive during a crisis requires taking the appropriate actions at critical stages of the crisis. After a traumatic event:



- FOCUS ON RESPONSE - Day one. Take whatever actions are required to ensure the immediate safety of students and staff.
- FOCUS ON INFORMATION - Day two. Make sure that accurate information is communicated to the community through the appropriate channels.
- FOCUS ON RECOVERY- Day 3 & beyond. It is during this time that teachers and school staff should prepare for children's re-entry into child care or school setting. Careful planning and generous support should be provided for students and staff.

There are six initial action steps for school staff after an event.

- Assess the situation. If necessary call for rescue or law enforcement.
- Deploy staff to cover critical areas.
- Assign a liaison with the school district.
- Reach out to meet the immediate needs of affected staff members and other victims, with onsite one-to-one attention.
- Cover phones and provide staff answering them with current, accurate information.
- Jumpstart correspondence and communication to community members.

Additional actions for school staff are:

- Ensure provisions are in place to notify all staff and answer their primary information needs, which include: what happened and where to go for safety, who is ok and who is not, and how to get help and how to provide help.
- Educate staff members and parents about signs of acute stress reactions and post-traumatic stress, and advocate for support in dealing with it.
- Manage the media and the message. Focus on constructive, healing messages. Prevent the media from interviewing children and limit children's media exposure, TV watching for example.
- Advocate for and communicate student and staff member needs to the larger organization, such as the school board.

Challenges

Be aware of the immediate challenges faced during crises.

- RUMOR CONTROL: Use clear and frequent communication to discourage rumors.
- PHONE LINE JAMS: Use combination walkie-talkie, radio, and cell phones to facilitate communication.
- MEDIA INTRUSION: Determine and maintain a perimeter around the school that media may not cross.
- SCATTERING OF STUDENTS AND STAFF: Establish "safe" areas or pre-identified locations (reunion areas) that students and staff should retreat to in the event of an emergency.
- MEDIA MISTAKES: Provide as much information as you can as quickly as you can, without speculating or releasing unverified information, to prevent the media from making mistakes. Advise the media about the potential destructiveness of broadcasting false information.

Get Media Literate and Media Wise!

The importance of media literacy skills cannot be overemphasized. These skills can greatly enhance a school's plan of action and capacity for day-to-day time management during a crisis. School staff should begin to:

- Engage pro-actively, rather than passively, as a media consumer. Research shows that exercising a degree of personal control over exposure to what is covered in the media, can contribute significantly to stress management.
- Ask, "What is it that we really want to see, hear, or read in the media?"
- Be specific and decisive in your communications with the media.

