

After the Tragedy or Crisis: What Educators and Parents Can Do

When a horrific act of violence happens, such as a shooting or rape on campus, you may be wondering how we can help students cope. Students will react differently. Some will seem to come through the experience unscathed. Later, some may begin to have delayed reactions. Others will react strongly from the start, even though they may have suffered little personal loss or any sense of threat. However, young adults have normal and typical reactions to these abnormal circumstances.

Students have:

- A need to talk about it.

Our first need after a tragedy is information. Unfortunately during a crisis there is limited information and many rumors. We instinctively share what we do know with others in an attempt to gather information and try to make sense of it.

- Concerns about safety.

We naturally want to distance ourselves from a tragic occurrence. When there are many similarities, that is hard to do. An unpredictable mass shooting on a college campus hits very close to home. It is natural to wonder about our own safety and to be concerned about a similar incident affecting us or our loved ones.

- Worries and fears.

We pay closer attention to the news. Most will be much more vigilant about the possible dangers in our community. Some may become apprehensive going about their daily lives. Hyper-vigilance is stressful and tiring.

- Sleep difficulties.

Fatigue can then lead to the increased need for sleep, yet stress and anxiety makes restful sleep difficult.

- Vivid images of the shooting.

Many young people will picture in their minds detailed and powerful scenes from televised reports of the shooting. It's almost as if they have their own internal videotape that replays the experience whenever there's a reminder of the shooting.

- Upset feelings or no feelings at all.
Some students will become much more sensitive. They can become upset easily and become angry quickly. But others may seem to become numb or unfeeling. They may not show any sadness or anger, but they also may not show any joy either. Some students may approach the tragedy from a philosophical or theological stance.

These are just some of the common, temporary reactions students can have to a shooting. Keep in mind that these are normal responses to an abnormal event. Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to help your students through these difficult times.

You can help by...

- Giving an opportunity to process the experience

Give your students time to deal with these experiences. Find a balance between acknowledging the obvious tragedy and returning to a sense of normalcy. If you set aside time for students to describe their reactions and to discuss the shooting's aftermath, they will be better able to turn to the work at hand.

- Teaching.

As teachers and parents, our goals are to help students to learn from their experiences, even those involving violence. This is an opportunity to connect, recreate a sense of security and to help them handle the stress that can interfere with them doing schoolwork.

- Being a good example.

Be especially calm, show your concern and emphasize the positive by offering appropriate reassurances and reminders of safety. By your manner, you will be setting a powerful example of how students can manage their reactions in a productive way.

- Noticing students who might be struggling.

If your students have had serious losses, such as the death of a loved one, a trauma of their own or even being a survivor of a school shooting, they may need more help. Refer to a professional if they are having extreme reactions to the shooting, such as repeated nightmares, flashbacks, crying spells, behavior problems, and panic reactions.

It's good to talk about it! We are here for YOU