

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF STUDENTS LINKS TO LEARNING

Purpose of this document

Schools experience a range of significant events that have the potential to seriously affect the emotional well being of students and also the environments in which they learn. Frequently incidents are managed successfully assisted by protective factors such as supportive relationships and school processes found in daily routines. Individual and collective coping strategies complimented by sensitive leadership can also assist. A prompt and appropriate response can maximise student coping mechanisms and often mitigate the emotional impact, however more serious incidents may require additional strategies/ responses. This document is provided to assist educators to effectively respond to a range of needs of students arising from a critical incident.

Some critical incidents that have an aspect of loss or change can potentially result in a grief response while other situations may reflect trauma. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss or a stressful event. There is a sense of longing, loss and emptiness. Trauma, on the other hand, generally involves a violation of our basic assumptions about life and our world. With trauma the event is lived through again and again with intensity and a power which seems to intrude from outside bringing feelings of terror and fear.

Teachers need to think about how:

Your own personal values and experience will be important in helping you and your students.

It is important to acknowledge your own past and current experiences and also their effects on you. It would be preferable to have thought through your own beliefs and how these might impact on your ability to respond to issues that may arise from students. You may find it easier to reflect on your personal issues with someone you trust.

Some reflections you may like to consider may include

- Where am I with my own losses and my mourning over them?
- Is there unfinished business or any other indication to suggest it is going to be difficult to facilitate an open and honest discussion with students?
- Am I able to differentiate my own issues and needs from those of the students?
- What are my expectations and limitations for myself in this work?
- What do I predict to be the most stressful aspects of dealing with the issues?
- What are my personal warning signs that indicate I am beginning to feel stressed?
- What support can I access if I need it? What are my personal strengths?

These questions will assist you in deciding your course of action to avoid restricting the healing process and the potential learning opportunities available to students. Previous personal experiences will influence your approach to addressing issues raised. It may provide you with an enriched understanding of the issues and a greater awareness of what you need in the current circumstances. Alternatively you may feel more confident dealing with the situation with the support of a colleague or social worker.

If these questions can be considered well before an incident, teachers will feel more empowered in dealing with them.

It need not be a school related incident that triggers connections both for students and teachers.

Potential reactions to incidents

As individuals, both students and teachers may experience a range of emotional reactions resulting from direct involvement in a traumatic incident. These reactions do not necessarily relate to incidents that have happened at school. Teachers and other school staff should remain aware that students experience trauma of which staff may be unaware and so the schooling accommodations suggested below should be considered in an on-going way as part of supportive and flexible environments.

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Sleep disturbance
- Difficulty in concentrating
- A general numbing so students may appear unmotivated
- Shock
- Confusion – What's happening? Why?
- Worried, concerned, insecure – What's going to happen?
- Helpless, out of control
- Weird – feeling different from others, feelings of detachment
- Angry, mad, not fair – Why is this happening to us?
- Marked decrease in interest in normal activities

LONGER TERM REACTIONS

- Persistent re-experiencing of the event
- Avoidance of specific factors or reminders associated with the event
- Aches and pains
- Restlessness
- Social withdrawal
- Behavioural changes
- The ability to manage and tolerate strong feelings may be affected

Links to learning

Educators can be assisting and supporting children to process their emotions and reactions to events while at the same time achieving curriculum outcomes. This does not replace therapeutic or professional support but rather will assist a flexible and supportive classroom environment

The following considerations may assist.

- Recognise the different levels of maturity within the class group to inform you on what and how processes are implemented
- Know that reactions are dependent on the developmental level of and the significance and circumstances of the event for the individual
- Review expectations of performance in schoolwork and homework,
- Consider what other tragedies have impacted on this particular school recently
- Continually monitor, review and adjust responses to meet emerging needs of students

Practical strategies to facilitate emotional wellbeing of students

What educators need to do:

- Assess the impact on students as well as themselves through involvement with a support service professional
- Build on individual repertoires of successful coping skills
- Explicitly acknowledge the event for individuals. Try not to interpret the meaning or impact of the event for others. Rather acknowledge the event and its relative magnitude compared to routine school life
- Provide for an individual's need to ventilate emotions in safe ways that will not harm themselves or others
- Provide reassurance and acceptance that distress is part of the process of healing and recovery
- Provide age-appropriate information to assist individuals in making sense of the event, while at the same time dispelling rumours
- Acknowledgment that personal experience and meaning of the event will be different for each individual
- Encourage student competence, mastery and sense of autonomy by allowing students to identify and implement strategies that work for them.
- Assist students to identify sources of support within existing networks and broader community networks
Talk with students about the scope and limits of what others can do and the need for processes to identify who, from the people and services identified, one can trust.
- Refrain from using platitudes ("You'll get over it 'Time will heal your wounds'") as they may have the effect of discouraging expressions and possibly discount the perceived importance of the situation.
- Assist students to articulate their thoughts and label their feelings in safe and private ways.
- Model appropriate caring, positive and supportive responses
- Provide flexible subgroups so that students can be alone, talk in small groups or continue with their schoolwork
- Draw on methodologies used successfully in the past to deal with distressing situations

Students and children need:

- The re-establishment of safety and meaning through engagement with significant others. In an educational setting this means using routines and the safety of predictable people, relationships and roles to assist the building of context and perspective.
- Maintenance of cohesion within peer group. For students who have been left out or isolated before the event, establish situations to facilitate inclusive learning environments.
- A place for confidential self-disclosure if desired. This needs to be negotiated as part of the school day and issues around privacy and trust need to be considered.
- Reassurance - The willingness and ability of adults to recognise and accept that expression of emotion can disrupt school and preschool routines but to nevertheless to allow the time and space for this to happen
- Educators to answer questions without providing unnecessary details)

Practical Strategies to Facilitate Emotional Well-Being of Students Following A Critical Incident

It is important to remember that the school needs to reflect the cultural context and therefore some suggested activities may not be relevant.

Essential

- At the start of the day of the lesson have students identify what contributes to their classroom and school environment that strengthens their sense of safety and security (*Id, KC4*)
- Students identify ways of interacting that work for them and what changes they need to consider at this time (*Id, T, KC6*)
- Students participate in a group conversation to establish a context that allows them to share their unique experiences so that they are not discounted (*Id KC4*)
- Students identify physical reactions being experienced and using comparisons from with the broader student and community population, normalise these (*Id, In, KC4*)
- Students engage in classroom discussions when the issue is class based and assist students to identify their strategies for managing change or loss (*Id, KC6*)
- Students review the protective behaviours concepts of individual early warning signs and assist them review their networks for relevancy for current circumstances and needs (*T, KC6*)
- Students may wish to draw a picture related to the event and write about the range of feelings and thoughts they have experienced (*Id, KC2*)
- Students identify the range of feelings that are common within the group to help normalise and legitimise their responses (*Id, KC4*)
- Students discuss the value of releasing emotions as a way to reduce emotional stress and assist students to identify how this might happen
- Students identify and participate in physical activities to assist in the release of adrenalin

In the longer term

- If the incident involves a death, allow students to raise any questions they have in relation to funeral procedures (*Id KC3*)
- Help the class plan how they will re-introduce and support survivors/victims when they return to school or during their absence (*In KC4*)

Optional

- Construct opportunities that support gender differences (*Id KC4*)
- Assist students to explore what they enjoy and what makes them feel good (*F KC3*)
- Students identify what help is available and how they can access additional support (*Id KC6*)
- Students learn or revisit relaxation strategies (*Id, KC4*)
- Students monitor their reactions over a period of time, ie rate their physiological responses, ie heart rate (*Id KC4*)
- Introduce rating scales of ways for students to register their level of discomfort (*Id, KC4*)
- Students design a collage of their feelings (*Id, KC2*)
- Students identify how their thinking influences their feelings, behaviour and relationships. (*T, KC6*)
- Students revisit previous learning experiences that enhance student well being (*F, KC1*)
- Create class slogans as themes to use when times are tough (*Id, KC3*)
- Students identify how they help others through difficult times (*Id, KC4*)

Some useful questions

- How did you find out what happened?
- How did you feel when you heard what had happened?
- Have you ever felt anything like this before?
- Has anything like this ever happened to you before?
- How are you feeling now?
- What would you like to happen now? (What needs to happen for you to feel better? How might that happen? Who needs to be involved?)
- What have you done in the past that has assisted you in difficult times?
- What do you most miss about....
- What is the most difficult aspects at the moment for you?
- What do you find most helpful at present?
- What do you want to have happen at school?
- Do you find it helpful to talk about this?
- How has this changed things for you?
- When are things OK for you?
- Who or what helps at these difficult times?

AGE SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Depending upon the circumstances of the event consider what suggestions are relevant or most appropriate.

All ages

Commemoration activities:

- Compile a collection of student's memories of their classmate - including things like favourite songs, jokes, sayings, music and pieces of work. If appropriate give it to the family or assist students to identify a special place where they would like to put their collection (*T, C, KC1*)

Writing and drawing activities:

- Without referring to the incident directly, ask students to write (or draw) about their activities during that general time, thereby allowing the children to choose whether or not they will refer to it. (*C, T, KC2*)
- Brainstorm various adjectives that describe strong emotions, making sure that all emotional levels are seen as acceptable when describing feelings. The list may be extended with some less common words such as 'ambivalent' or "distraught" so that more complex emotions can be identified. (*T, KC2*)

Closure activities

- Ask the class to plan something by way of recovery (*F, KCI, KC2*)
- Incorporate discussions on reactions to crises and how people cope into curriculum areas such as:

English

- Have students write stories that cover different aspects of critical events. These might include stories about community and personal impact, human interest and ecological impact. You might also discuss issues such as accurate reporting, sensationalism and censorship. (*F, C, KC2*)
- Students may write their thoughts in a journal (*F, Id, T, KC2*)
- Have students report on crises that have occurred in mythology or that appear in fiction and poetry (*T, C, KC2*)

Health Education and Personal Development

- Stress management, relaxation, taking care of one's emotional and physical wellbeing under stress. Encourage students to resume sporting, social and leisure activities (*Id, KC6*)
- Have students develop a mental health brochure in which they discuss emotional and behavioural reactions to crisis and the things that are helpful in coping (*F, C, KC2, KC7*)
- Examine various community systems and how the crisis has affected them (*In, C, KC1, KC3*)
 - Discuss the effects of adrenalin on the body during stress and danger (*T KC1*)

Science

- Investigate the effects of a natural disaster on the environment. (*T, KCI*)
- Discuss the scientific aspects of the crisis (*T, KCI*)

Art

- Painting murals, clay modelling (*T, C, KC2*)

Drama

- Acting out the incident and possible different scenarios (*T, C, KC1*)

History

- Have students report on crises that have occurred both around the world and in the geographical location of the current crisis (*T, C, KC1, KC2*)

Material adapted from "Elements of Crisis Intervention by Greenstone, James Rand Leviton Sharon C, 1993)

Junior Primary age students

- Provide information about the event in brief and succinct formats so as to not overwhelm the student, gradually adding detail as the need for or questions arise (*T, C, KC2*)
- Allow for repetition of questions or issues as this helps an individual to make sense of the situation (*Id, KC2*)
- Build on the student's current repertoire of coping skills (*Id, In, KC6*)
- Revisit processes and conditions that contribute to a child's sense of safety (*Id, In, KC6*)
- Explore a range of processes with students that result in identification of constructive processes for dealing with the issues that arise as a result of the loss or change (*Id, T KC6*)
- Encourage play, drawings and unstructured literacy exercises such as journal entries (*F, Id, KC2*)
- Group games give a feeling of security so structured activities involving music, large balls, bean bags and physical movement can help. (*Id, In, KC4*)
- Games where children have mastery over events in teams and individually will help re-build confidence (*Id, In KC4*)

Primary age students

- Explain the circumstances around the event in concrete terms (*Id, In, KC1*)
- Help students to recognise and label their feelings and to understand and be tolerant of other student's different reactions. (*Id, C, KC2*)
- Facilitate conversations that explore the range of changes they have dealt with and what strategies have assisted them in feeling safe and supported. (*Id, In, KC6*)
- Identify ways that peers might acknowledge a loss experienced by a class member whether it might be a card signed by all class members or what might be said to a class member on return from an absence as a result of an event. (*In, KC4*)
- Read an appropriate age level novel and stop at relevant parts to discuss how the character is feeling and what they could do to positively influence their thoughts and feelings. (*T, KC2*)
- Use puppets, role-plays, or other mediums to explore the feelings we experience and what dominant thoughts are associated with different feelings. Encourage them to include anything positive about the experience as well as frightening aspects. (*T, KC2*)
- Have children create stories about the crisis and how it was managed. (*T, KC2*)
- Create sentences starters such as "When I feel worried I can.. P or "I feel sad when." (*F, Id, KC2*)
- Have children draw pictures and discuss them in relation to the crisis. It is important that the discussion end on positive note if possible. (*F, Id KC2*)
- Encourage class activities in which children can organise and build projects, such as scrapbooks, to give them a sense of mastery and ability to organise what seems chaotic and confusing. (*F, Id, KC2*)

Secondary students

The expression of emotions by adolescents can be disruptive to normal school processes and routines. However, by not permitting some emotional release, the capacity of students to engage in learning is restricted. The following strategies may assist in this process.

- Have students consider the diversity of the student population and the range of ways they may deal with the event. (In, Id, KC1, KC6)
- Have students explore the value of expressing feelings (Id, KC2)
- Provide opportunities for discussion of students' experiences concerning the crisis situation. This is important to adolescents, as they need to vent as well as to normalise the extreme emotions that may arise for them. (Id, In, KC2)
- Construct opportunities for "required helpfulness" (*Id, In, KC1, KC2*)
- Negotiate the level of involvement that individual students may want in school processes that are specifically established for acknowledging the event. This helps them to overcome feelings of helplessness, frustration and guilt common to these situations. (*Id, KC2*)
- If behaviours are unacceptable, engage with the individual student in a non judgmental way to help them explore other alternative strategies for expressing their needs (*Id, C, KC6*)
- Explore what is meant by the idea that peers are companions and sources of support. (*Id, In, KC4*)
- End on a positive and practical note - "What can we do immediately?" eg prepare a memorial service, "What can we do in the longer term?" eg plan for disaster prevention, "Who is going to do what and when?" (*Id, In, KC6*)