

Revised July 2010.

Guidelines for Addressing the Needs of Students in the Aftermath of Trauma

The following document is a joint effort of the UFT and the Department of Education and is designed to help you and your students in the immediate aftermath of a major tragedy like that which we experienced on September 11, 2001.

Our foremost concern is to maintain a safe and supportive educational environment for each of our 1, 100,000 students in the aftermath of a traumatic event. We have sought the advice and direction of internationally renowned experts to guide our efforts.

The days and weeks after any crisis are difficult and trying. We are confident that you have the skills and knowledge necessary to help students and staff with the problems that such situations, when they arise, inevitably present within your communities.

Our immediate goal after a tragedy should be to normalize our lives as much – and as quickly – as possible. The recommendations we are making in this brief outline will be of help to you as you and your students move forward in the first few days after a catastrophic event.

I. Guidelines for Addressing the Immediate Needs of Students in the Aftermath Of Trauma

- Build a sense of community at the classroom and school level.
- Discuss the facts and relevant details of the event. Students need to discuss the event so that they can effectively cope with the situation.
- Reassure students about their safety and security.
- Provide opportunities for your students to ask questions in order for them to deal with these events.
- Listen empathetically and provide opportunities for students to express their feelings.
- Provide honest and respectful answers.
- Validate students' feelings and experiences without judging.
- Return to the normal schedule of the school as soon as possible.
- Be careful not to lecture.
- Be comfortable with periods of silence.
- Avoid cliches such as, 'Be strong...' and 'You are doing so well...' as these may only serve to reinforce a students' feeling of aloneness.
- Remember that cultural differences exist and that students express emotions in different ways.
- Identify students that may require more intensive services and make the appropriate referrals.
- Be sensitive to possible conflicts that might arise between various ethnic groups.

Note: In schools where children have lost loved ones, there should be discussions of ways the other children can express their sympathy, e.g., student-generated cards, pictures, books, visits, etc.

In the aftermath of a tragedy, children and teenagers need:

1. to understand the factual details about what has happened;
2. to be reassured, truthfully, that they, their families and their friends are safe; and
3. to realize that they are not alone in their confusion, grief and anxiety.

The recommendations made in this brief outline address these three essential components for coping with a situation of this gravity.

Note: Teachers know the developmental levels of students better than anybody. Trust your instincts about the degree of information and the mode of communication for sharing.

II. Explaining the Event

After a traumatic event children need to construct a "trauma story." This "story" helps identify the traumatic experience as a discrete event with a beginning, a middle, and an end. You may find that your students have the need to repeat their story often. At the outset of coping with a tragedy, this activity can provide a significant cathartic benefit.

Feel free to add any facts that you believe will help clarify the situation for your students. Students also will have their own personal details to contribute to this shared story. It is important to give voice to both the shared details and the individual experiences. One way children are reassured is by continuing clarification of confusing and frightening situations

Provide an objective accounting of the events that happened based on facts that have been made public.

3. Safety

Students need to be reassured that they are safe and that all necessary precautions are being taken to prevent a similar crisis from occurring again in the future. They should be told that responsible parties are working around-the-clock to:

- secure our safety and make sure that a similar incident cannot happen again;
- ensure that all our security procedures are in effect; and
- in the event of a terrorist attack or similar violent incident, identify and swiftly bring the responsible party or parties to justice.

NOTE. Feel free to add any information relevant to your school and community that will provide reassurance. Specific details are always more reassuring than general promises.

4. Identifying Symptoms/Behaviors of Students Who May Need Additional Intervention:

- Students who cannot engage adequately in classroom assignments and activities after a sufficient amount of time has passed since the crisis and after a majority of their peers are able to do so.

- Students who continue to exhibit high levels of emotional responsiveness (e.g., crying, tearfulness) after a majority of their peers have stopped doing so.
- Students who continue to exhibit poorer academic performance and decreased concentration.
- Students who express suicidal or homicidal ideation or students who are intentionally hurting themselves (e.g., cutting themselves).
- Students who exhibit an apparent increased usage of alcohol or drugs.
- Students who gain or lose a significant amount of weight in a short period of time.
- Students who exhibit significant behavioral changes.
- Students who stop attending to hygienic needs.

5. Communication with Parents

It is important to communicate with parents concerning issues that may arise as a result of a tragedy. Review the following resources to assist you in helping parents understand how they can help their children cope with an incident:

- a. **Crisis Counseling Guide to Children and Families in Disasters**, New York State Office of Mental Health
- b. **A Practical Guide for Crisis Response in Our Schools**, Publication of the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.

6. Resources

Within your school community there will be people who cope with tragedy on various levels. Depending upon an individual's circumstances, various levels of support will be needed. The Division of Student Support Services may be of help; you can also call upon your local community-based mental health agencies that will be helpful in providing counseling and support to students, parents and staff.

- Division of Student Support Services - New York City Department of Education
Francine Goldstein, Chief Executive (718) 935-4042
Vincent B. Giordano, Executive Director (718) 935-3252
Barbara Erdman Lipner, Director Student Support Services (718) 935-3415
Alida Seidel, Director of Pupil Personnel Services (718) 935-3415
- Division of Student Safety and Prevention Services
Gregory Thomas, Executive Director (718) 935-4340
- New York University Child Study Center - (212) 263-6622
Dr. Harold Koplowitz
Dr. Mary Courtney
- New York State Office of Mental Health - Disaster Mental Health Services
Joe LeViness, Coordinator (518) 474-2578
- Mental Health Association of New York City, Inc.
1-800-LIFENET or (212) 995-5824
MHA Public Education Program
Rachel Kammer, Director (718) 299-2771