
Schools Helping Students Deal with Loss

In the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina, while schools will need to plan to address the suffering and loss of many, we will also be awed by many demonstrations of strength and resilience. And, in planning ways to help folks cope, we will want to build on strengths.

Moreover, it is important to remember the following points (adapted from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention):

- C No one who experiences an event leading to significant loss is untouched by it.
- C Most people involved will pull together and function, but their effectiveness is diminished.
- C Loss and grief reactions are “normal responses to an abnormal situation.”
- C Those experiencing loss respond to active, genuine interest and concern.
- C Initial disaster mental health assistance is often more practical than psychological in nature (listening, encouraging, reassuring, comforting).

And, as the American Psychological Association stresses, all responses should focus on fostering resiliency (see Exhibit 1). As the association also notes:

“The act of providing help to others during difficult times may be beneficial to the provider as well as the recipient). It is empowering for children and adolescents to help others.”



The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,

Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563
 Phone: (310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-8716 Toll Free: (866) 846-4843
 email: smhp@ucla.edu website: <http://smhp.psych.ucl.edu>



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Exhibit 1. Fostering Resiliency*

The following are excerpts adapted from a series of fact sheets available online at:
<http://www.apa.org/psychologists/pdfs/children.pdf>

What Can Schools Do To Build Resilience in Children and Adolescents?

Schools provide an excellent environment in which to teach and enhance skills for building resilience. As children are used to learning in a classroom environment, school groups are a natural extension when setting up exercises for building resilience. Some ideas for building resilience in the school setting include the following:

- *Identify supportive adults in children's lives.* These often include family members and teachers, but may also be expanded to include scout leaders, coaches, religious leaders, and first responders to whom children can turn in the event of an emergency. Help children of all ages generate a list of potential people to whom they can turn in the event of a terrorist attack.
- *Create positive connections by developing classroom projects* that increase the opportunities for teamwork and respect. These can provide children with a sense of belonging and contributing to something beyond themselves. Ideas can include artwork for the school buildings around themes of helping, respect, and diversity.
- *Enhance positive attitudes by developing coping strategies* such as positive self-statements. The idea of mastery and control over an event is another important ingredient for resilience. Positive thinking can be used before taking tests, giving presentations, etc. The skills need to be practiced during day-to-day activities, not only when a traumatic event occurs.
- *Teach children to relax in the face of difficulties* by mastering simple relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, muscle relaxation, or using imagery. These can be practiced prior to test-taking, sporting events, recitals, presentations, etc.
- *Help children set realistic goals* by thinking in terms of baby steps. Help children understand that problems do not need to be managed all at once, but can be solved by attacking them one piece at a time. Children can begin to think of problems as a pie and to develop solutions for each piece of the pie; soon the entire pie is consumed by solutions.
- *Help children identify positive coping strategies* that can be used in the face of adversity. These may take many forms and can be used at different times. In general, active coping strategies (i.e., doing something positive to help--such as writing cards or letters, collecting money or volunteering, making positive self-statements, exercising, eating well, keeping a journal, getting together with friends or family) are associated with better outcomes than avoidant or passive coping (i.e., withdrawal, self-blame, denial).
- *Increase children's sense of mastery and control over events.*

*Resilience has been described as a phenomenon whereby individuals show positive adaptation in spite of significant life adversities (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). It is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially highly stressful or traumatic events (O'Leary, 1998; O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995; Rutter, 1987). Resilience is an interactive product of beliefs, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and, perhaps, physiology, that help children and adolescents fare better during adversity and recover more quickly following it. Resilient children bend rather than break during stressful conditions, and they return to their previous level of psychological and social functioning following misfortune. Being resilient does not mean that one does not experience difficulty or distress or that life's major hardships are not difficult and upsetting. Rather, it means that these events, although difficult and upsetting, are ultimately surmountable.

Exhibit 2. About Facilitating and Fostering Social Ties and Resources

People seek out others for solace and support during difficult times. Identifying and utilizing these resources are important for resiliency. Social support is critical to managing stress. Caring and supportive relationships can provide emotional support that may buffer the impact of acutely stressful situations or crises and allow for expression of difficult emotions. Supportive social networks also can provide assistance and information relevant to managing traumatic stressors. For children and adolescents, parents and close friends represent primary sources of support. Research supports the importance of (a) support from parents and family members, (b) support from classmates and close friends, and (c) reaffirming ties to such institutions as social and religious groups.

What Works

Parents, teachers, and other caring adults can help children and adolescents cope with stressful events and build resilience in several ways.

- C *Provide children and adolescents with opportunities to share and discuss their feelings and concerns.* This enables parents and other caring adults to correct any misinformation or misperceptions and to provide reassurance about safety.
- C *Encourage children and adolescents to resume normal roles and routines or develop new routines.* Youngsters feel safe and secure when their activities are predictable and not always focused on the negative events.
- C *Maintain social connections.* Youngsters' friendships and social activities are important for normalizing children's and adolescents' lives and promoting good adjustment.
- C *Reduce or minimize children's and adolescents' exposure to upsetting images.* For example, after a disaster eliminate viewing without an adult present, restrict media viewing, discuss news shows and other programming with children, and actively encourage alternative activities (e.g., reading, athletic activities, games with friends).
- C *Encourage children and teens to stay healthy and fit* by eating well and getting regular exercise and proper sleep. Maintaining good health is important for coping with stress.
- C *Encourage children and adolescents to use positive strategies for coping* with stressors that ensue. Parents and caring adults may also model positive coping for children.

What Doesn't Work

- C *Avoiding discussions of distressing events.* Parents and other caring adults may think that children are not bothered by events or that discussions of events will be upsetting to them; however, this may lead to missed opportunities for sharing and support.
- C *Pressuring children to talk.* Create a positive, receptive atmosphere for discussions, and let children bring issues up as they choose. Occasional direct questions about how a child is doing will communicate to the child that the parent or adult is interested.

Note: The Fostering Resilience series is a product of the APA Task Force on Resilience in Response to Terrorism. Each fact sheet is designed as a resource for psychologists working to promote resilience among a variety of target populations. See original facts sheets for references to the research base for the above and for citations.

The American Psychological Association encourages psychologists to refer clients and members of the public to the APA Practice Directorate's online Help Center (www.APAHelpCenter.org) and such resources as The Road to Resilience (www.APAHelpCenter.org/resilience).

This set of guidance notes focuses on assisting the many students, school staff, administrators, and families who will have experienced a variety of losses – some of which are so significant as to lead to grief reactions (see Exhibit 3).

Grief reactions to loss have been well described (for example, see the packet developed by the Center entitled: *Responding to Crisis at a School* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/crisis/crisis.pdf>)

Exhibit 3: Stages of Grieving

Grieving disrupts a student's normal functioning. But it need not be a long lasting problem and "working" through grief can help restore emotional health. Although the stages of grief may not occur in order, they have been described as follows:

- *Shock* -- usually the first reaction -- often experienced as numbness or physical pain and associated with withdrawal.
- *Denial* -- acting as if no loss has occurred
- *Depression* -- feeling pain, despair, emptiness -- may not be accompanied by some emotional release such as crying (if the person can cry, it helps release stress)
- *Guilt* -- self-blame for not having expressed more caring or belief the loss was his/her fault
- *Anxiety* -- panic reactions as reality sets in
- *Aggression* -- toward those who might have prevented the loss and sometimes toward the lost object (may have trouble acknowledging anger toward the object of loss, but if such anger can be expressed it can help with recovery)
- *Reintegration* -- loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).

School Planning and Action to Address Problems of Loss When Many are Affected

Schools need to ensure the system is prepared to handle the problems:

- (1) Plan for building capacity to act effectively in addressing students, school staff, administrators, and families who have experienced loss. In doing so, take advantage of the strengths of all stakeholders, including those in the community.
- (2) Take steps to enhance a supportive environment school-wide and in classrooms.
- (3) Reduce existing stressors on everyone who is affected.
- (4) Address the problems of the many through broad-band “natural” opportunities at school (see Exhibit 2) and general strategies designed to strengthen existing family and peer supports.
- (5) Identify and respond to individuals through mobilizing specific families and friends.
- (6) As necessary, refer individuals for specific assistance. In such instances, schools need to have
 - (a) enhanced the capacity of their support staff with respect to providing psychological first aid and counseling
 - (b) established effective links to appropriate community resources
 - (c) established effective referral, triage, care management, and follow-up systems.

(See Center resource packet:

School-Based Client Consultation, Referral, and Management of Care –

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/consultation/consultation2003.pdf>)

- (7) Be prepared to help bereaved students when they return to school.
- (8) Ensure that there is ongoing vigilance to identify delayed reactions in the coming months.

Exhibit 4 highlights some specific points that have been suggested for helping students deal with loss.

Exhibit 5 highlights some specific points that have been suggested for helping bereaved students return to school.

***And, don't forget to provide for diversity (e.g., language, cultural differences, disabilities).

(See Center packet:

Cultural Concerns in Addressing Barriers to Learning

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/cultural/culture.pdf>)

Exhibit 4: Helping Students Deal with Loss

As in all loss situations, grieving students need to experience school as a safe place to think about and express their loss. To this end, school staff need to be prepared to

- (1) Recognize the loss and encourage students to talk about what happened and how they are feeling. ("Tell me what happened." "I'm so sorry")
- (2) Tell them as a group what happened and respond emotionally. Directly relate the facts and let them know how you feel.
- (3) Allow students to express their reactions and be prepared to validate the variety of emotions that will emerge in relation to each stage of grieving. Offer time for students to share their feelings and facilitate the exploration. When working with groups, validate the feelings expressed -- even if they seem harsh. (Students will express anger, fear, guilt, and so forth. Sometimes, they will even indicate relief that what happened to someone else didn't happen to them. Others may find it hard to express anything.) Responses should be warm and understanding.
- (4) Be prepared to answer questions directly and sensitively. Relate the facts of an event to the degree that you can. In discussing death, recognize its finality -- don't compare it with sleeping (that can lead to sleep problems for students).
- (5) In the situation where a student is returning to school after experiencing severe loss, be sure that classmates have been prepared with respect to what to say and how to act. It is critical that they welcome the student and not shy away ("Glad you're here." "When you feel like it, let's talk about it.").
- (6) Don't forget to take care of yourself -- especially if the loss is one for you too.

Exhibit 5: Helping Bereaved Students Return to School

Students experiencing loss sometimes don't want to go to school anymore. There are many reasons for this. Crisis response plans should address what to do to maximize a student's return after a loss.

- (1) Outreach. A visit with the family can help assess needs and how to address them. A step-by-step plan can be made with the student's family.
- (2) Special support and accommodations at school. Teachers and other staff need to be informed as to the plan and of ways to help the student readjust. Connecting the student to special friends and counselors who will be especially supportive. Ensuring that everyone understands grief reactions and is ready to be appropriately responsive. Added support around classroom learning activities can help if the student is having trouble focusing.
- (3) Counseling to help the student through the stages of grief. In general, the student needs to have prompt and accurate information about what happened, honest answers to questions, an opportunity to work through the grief, and lots of good support.