

Psychological First Aid: Responding to a Student in Crisis



This **Quick Training Aid** was excerpted from a Resource Aid Packet entitled: *Responding to a Crisis at a School*, p. 31. Center for Mental Health in Schools (2000).

Pynoos and Nader (1988)* discuss psychological first aid for use during and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis (providing a detailed outline of steps according to age). Their work helps all of us think about some general points about responding to a student who is emotionally upset.

Psychological first aid for students/staff/parents can be as important as medical aid. The immediate objective is to help individuals deal with the troubling psychological reactions.

(1) Managing the situation

A student who is upset can produce a form of *emotional contagion*.

To counter this, staff must

- ? present a calm, reassuring demeanor,
- ? clarify for classmates and others that the student is upset
- ? if possible indicate why the student is upset (correct rumors and distorted information)
- ? state what can and will be done to help the student.

(2) Mobilizing Support

The student needs *support and guidance*.

Ways in which staff can help are to

- ? try to engage the student in a problem-solving dialogue
 - >normalize the reaction as much as feasible
 - >facilitate emotional expression (e.g., through use of empathy, warmth, and genuineness)
 - >facilitate cognitive understanding by providing information
 - >facilitate personal action by the student (e.g., help the individual do something to reduce the emotional upset and minimize threats to competence, self-determination, and relatedness)
- ? encourage the student's buddies to provide social support
- ? contact the student's home to discuss what's wrong and what to do
- ? refer the student to a specific counseling resource.

(3) Following-up

Over the following days (sometimes longer), it is important to check on how things are progressing.

- ? Has the student gotten the necessary support and guidance?
- ? Does the student need help in connecting with a referral resource?
- ? Is the student feeling better? If not, what additional support is needed and how can you help make certain that the student receives it?

Another form of "first aid" involves helping needy students and families connect with emergency services. This includes connecting with agencies that can provide emergency food, clothing, housing, transportation, and so forth. Such basic needs constitute major crises for too many students and are fundamental barriers to learning and performing and even to getting to school.

*Pynoos & Nader (1988), Psychological first aid and treatment approach to children exposed to community violence. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 1, 445-473.