September 2, 2008

From: UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools

Re: Resources for School Staff Responding to a Natural Disaster

Those concerned with mental health in schools and addressing barriers to learning and teaching know there is much to do in the aftermath of the hurricane and evacuations.

As soon as school opens, despite their own suffering, school personnel will need to hit the ground running in providing social and emotional supports for students and staff. Hopefully, they have prepared for this.

And, with the next hurricane on the way and tornadoes, floods, wildfires and other natural disasters always a threat, the rest of us need to use this as another reminder of the need to prepare before the next event in our locale.

We want to remind everyone that there are a variety of online resources available for aftermath support and for planning in anticipation of future events (see below).

Also, in order to get on top of lessons learned, we plan to devote our Practitioner Listserv for the next few weeks to the matter of student and staff support in anticipation of and in the aftermath of a natural disaster. If you are not on this listserv, you may want to sign on. (Just reply to this and tell us to add you.) And, we encourage everyone to send us anything they can share to help those affected already and as aids for future planning. We will circulate whatever we get as widely and quickly as feasible.

School Support for Students and Staff Affected by Natural Disaster

On the home page of our website is a circle “Responding to a Crisis” to provide an easy access to resources when you most need them. Go to http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu

As natural disasters affect communities and their schools, we want to make the most relevant resources easily accessible (i.e., earthquakes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes).

In the links to materials related to “Resources for Responding to and coping with Hurricane related events” http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/hurricane.htm , you will see guides for anticipating the reactions of students and families and how schools can play a role in recovery.

Here are excerpts from several resources you can link to from this site:

(1) From Hurricane-related Distress, FSU Traumatology Institute (C. Figley)

“There are four phases each with its own set of demands or stressors

I. Anticipation and Preparation: Starts from warning to impact

Human reactions range from panic buying and preparing to hostile avoidance and denial. Best to attempt to gain as much control over stress as possible by making effective preparations...

II. Disaster Impact. Lasts as long as there is perceived immediate danger

Associated with seeking safety and making mental notes of what was done right to cope and stay safe. Keep mind occupied, especially if very fearful..
III. Immediate Post-Disaster Impact.

Starts with return to a sense of safety and ends with a sense of normality. Most dangerous phase because of effort to return home is risky. There is a desperate need try to return to normal. Greatest interests are what happened to my stuff and loved ones, should we rebuild or vacate, what is best for my family.

Coping with Anxiety During Phase III

Parents must be on the same team and focus on the welfare of the children first. Be patient and flexible with children's behavior and reactions (both physical and emotional).

Kid's reactions (like adults) vary greatly: they have suffered losses too, and it's natural for them to express disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety and depression afterwards.

Emotions of hurricane survivors often follow a roller coaster pattern of changes in mood, emotion, energy --- can change unexpectedly.

Children, in particular, resent the shattering of their routine. That resentment may manifest itself in enormous guilt, nightmares, temper tantrums and problems at school.

IV. Long-term Post-Disaster Impact.

Starts after a sense of normality and never ends with elevations. Longest phase is associated with creating a new normal, grieving the losses, thankful it was not worse and potential growth, efforts to recover by drawing upon own personal and social resources, some need help in doing so. Most recover completely unless there are other emotional issues or mental disorders (e.g., previous trauma, grief of loss, depression, storm-related phobia)....

Mental health experts say the unscathed often suffer "survivor's guilt." People suffering survivor's guilt often push themselves to the limit trying to help. There is a natural grieving process – denial, questioning, acceptance and recovery -- after the loss of normalcy, loved ones and property.

(2) From National Association of School Psychologists, Communique, Vol 33, #4 (F. Zenere)

“Hurricane experiences provide lessons for the future”

...A single natural disaster striking a particular region has the potential to cause significant damage, lead to widespread disruption and displacement, and heighten the level of human misery...School districts can bolster their readiness for disaster response and recovery by assuring that crisis management policy, procedures and training activities reflect the environmental challenges common to their communities. Such actions should include the development of inter-agency and inter-district collaborative agreements that foster sharing of human and material resources during periods of acute need. Further, equipping school mental health professionals with the skills to offer guidance during the post-disaster response and recovery period is paramount.

Response and Recovery

... hurricane impact frequently leads to an elongated period of school closure. This time frame can and has been utilized efficiently, to prepare for the reopening of schools...The importance of bringing school mental health and instructional staff back to school well in advance of students can not be overstated. These caregivers need the opportunity to share and sort through their own disaster related experiences prior to addressing the needs of students. Further, instructional personnel can be charged with the responsibility of determining the current status of their students. Key information regarding damage to homes, potential relocation, loss or injury of family members and/or pets, and food, clothing and school supply needs, is vital in supporting a
School facilities are often designated as disaster evacuation shelter sites. These venues provide residence for many who have lost their homes as a result of disaster, and also provide an opportunity for school officials to assess family and child needs. Likewise, Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC) operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), are set up in heavily impacted communities to support the reestablishment of basic needs and infrastructure. It is recommended that school district officials, including mental health professionals, be present in all DRC’s to disseminate information and provide guidance for parents seeking support for their children.

School Reentry

With the exception of the resumption of basic services (e.g., water and electricity) and the provision of basic needs (e.g., food and shelter), no other occurrence better represents the initial phase of a community's post-disaster recovery than the reopening of schools. The closing of school triggers a disruption in the continuity of a child's life, which may lead to emotional and behavioral destabilization. In contrast, the return to school can provide a child with the healing environment of routine and structure, concrete expectations and predictability, and peer camaraderie and support; all of which are essential elements for reestablishing a sense of safety and security, and set the foundation for academic achievement.

Triage

Although the vast majority of students returning to school following a hurricane will be impacted by their disaster experience, very few will actually be traumatized. Post-disaster reactions can be best characterized by widespread distress, moderate behavioral changes and minimal occurrences of psychopathology. Numerous factors may influence a child's reaction(s) to storm exposure, including nature of warning, speed of onset, proximity, perceived level of threat, fear of loss of life, exposure to death and destruction, duration and sensorial perceptions.

Children most at risk for the development of post-disaster emotional difficulties that impact functioning are those who feel that their lives, or the lives of loved ones, are in jeopardy during the storm. Experiences marked by feelings of terror and helplessness are also highly correlated with post traumatic stress reactions...Children who may have had previous exposure to, and unresolved issues surrounding, trauma situations, including disasters, as well as youth with pre-existing psychopathology, also demonstrate an elevated risk for post-disaster difficulties.

Additional factors predictive of long-term emotional impact include children who were very upset during and after the disaster; those who lost their home or possessions; those who had to relocate to new homes and/or schools; and those children who attended schools that were forced to move to double sessions or make significant schedule adjustments.

Developmental Issues

Teachers and parents should be prepared to confront numerous emotional and behavioral issues that may influence a student's ability to cope with their disaster experience and could also impact school performance. Children of elementary school age may exhibit a spectrum of post disaster reactions including a wide array of fears, regressive behavior, behavioral difficulties, depressive symptoms and school difficulties. Following a lengthy period of school closure, young children may re-experience separation anxiety issues when leaving their parents, often out of concern of potential harm occurring to a family member in their absence. Other concerns include fear of the dark, especially if the storm occurred during evening hours; and for some very young children, a fear that they may have caused the disaster. The aforementioned reaction is consistent with the developmental characteristics of magical thinking and egocentric perspective, commonplace among pre-kindergarten to early elementary age children.

A child's ability to concentrate and focus sustained attention on a task may be especially
compromised. The disaster experience along with a multitude of environmental disruptions may also influence the development of hyperactive and/or general acting out behavior, nightmares and other sleep disturbances, which in turn may lead to a decline in academic success. Similarly, adolescents may demonstrate in-kind reactions consistent with their elementary age counterparts. Additionally, teenagers are increasingly likely to elicit risk behaviors, including drug use, sexual acting out, dropping out of school, and antisocial and/or suicidal behavior, in response to their disaster-related exposure.

Attention must also be directed to the multiplicity of losses that accompany disaster. The death of a loved one or pet, destruction of one's home, missing material possessions or relocation to a new school all represent tangible losses that impact recovery. Moreover, intangible factors including a decline in a child's sense of safety and security, and eroding trust in parents/adults as protective agents, further lead to an increase in emotional distress.

**Supporting Recovery**

School mental health professionals can perform a variety of functions that support student adjustment and resiliency following a disaster experience. Serving as consultants, advocates, trainers and interventionists, they possess the skills that help to provide the foundation for recovery. The extension of support services is highly dependent upon the receptivity of school leadership. Once an invitation is extended, the mental health professional is in position to advocate for "best practice" approaches for addressing the educational, social and emotional needs of children, families, and school personnel impacted by the disaster. ...School mental health professionals should encourage teachers to maintain the routine and structure familiar to students prior to the disaster. However, efforts should be taken to alter workload expectations and avoid the introduction of new material during the transitional school reentry period. The following recommendations are provided for teachers to assist students in making a successful return to school in the aftermath of disaster:

- Meet and greet students as they enter the classroom.
- Remain calm and reassuring.
- Acknowledge and normalize feelings/reactions.
- Provide opportunities for children to share their concerns.
- Promote and praise positive coping and problem solving skills.
- Involve children in activities that permit them to make choices and re-establish some control over their environment.
- Involve students in recovery-oriented activities and projects.
- Consider the developmental stage and experiences of each child.
- Incorporate disaster-related information into the curriculum.
- Provide collaborative activities that strengthen student's friendships and support.

The judicious use of Psychological First Aid (PFA) can be a helpful tool for the school mental health practitioner. PFA can be utilized to respond to the acute desire to share one's disaster experiences; provide information regarding future expectations; provide information about risk indicators for the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); and examine what symptoms/behaviors should signal help seeking. When employed appropriately, PFA may accomplish the following objectives:

- Provide a sense of comfort, calm, reassurance and support
- Provide an accurate account of the individual's experience
- Respect individuals that decline the opportunity to discuss their experience
- Promote acceptance and validation of reactions and feelings
- Emphasize the importance of social support connections
• Enhance problem solving ability
• Address fears and anxieties
• Reduce stigma and shame
• Disseminate information important to the recovery process
• Emphasize that help is available

Responding to the array of emerging student symptoms and behaviors will challenge school personnel during the post disaster period. School mental health professionals can assist teachers in providing timely information and guidance for addressing anticipated features, including psychosomatic complaints, aggressive or acting out behaviors, and despondency over disaster-related losses. Bereavement groups can be established in schools to provide grieving students the opportunity to process the multiplicity of losses that are common outcomes of natural disaster. The presence of complicated grief, PTSD, or depressive/suicidal behaviors, should result in immediate parent/guardian contact and referral to appropriate community-based mental health resources.”

(3) There are several helpful resources from the National Child Traumatic Stress Center http://www.nctsnet.org

From Recovery: After a Hurricane

“After a hurricane most families can be expected to recover over time, particularly with the support of family, friends, and organizations. The length of recovery will depend upon how frightening the hurricane was, if evacuation from home was necessary, and the extent of the damage and loss. Some families will return to their normal routine fairly quickly, while others will have to contend with destruction to their home and possessions, obtaining medical care, and overcoming financial hardship. Some families will have lost a loved one or a pet. Others will need to adjust to school closings or changes in school schedule.

Children's functioning will be influenced by how their parents and other caregivers cope during and after the hurricane. Children often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help. Parents and teachers should try to remain calm, answer children's questions honestly, and respond as best they can to requests.

Children's Reactions
Children react differently to a hurricane and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Some will respond by withdrawing, while others will have angry outbursts. Still others will become agitated or irritable. Parents should attempt to remain sensitive to each child's reactions. The following are typical reactions children might exhibit during any natural disaster:

• Fear and worry about their safety or the safety of others, including pets
• Fear of separation from family members
• Clinging to parents, siblings, or teachers
• Worry that another hurricane will come
• Increase in activity level
• Decrease in concentration and attention
• Withdrawal from others
• Angry outbursts or tantrums
• Aggression to parents, siblings, or friends
• Increase in physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches
• Change in school performance
- Long-lasting focus on the hurricane, such as talking repeatedly about it or acting out the event in play
- Increased sensitivity to sounds of thunder, wind, or things crashing
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, even playing with friends
- Regressive behaviors, such as baby-talk, bedwetting, or tantrums
- Increase in risky behaviors for teens, such as drinking alcohol, using substances, harming themselves, or engaging in dangerous activities

**What You Can Do to Help Your Child**

Parents should spend time talking to their children, letting them know that it is okay to ask questions and to share their worries. Issues may come up more than once and parents should remain patient and open to answering questions again and needing to clarify things. Although it will be hard finding time to have these conversations, parents can use regular family mealtimes or bedtimes to talk. They can let children know what is happening in the family, with their school, and in the community. They should answer questions briefly and honestly and be sure to ask their children for their opinions and ideas. For younger children, after talking about the hurricane, parents might read a favorite story or have a relaxing family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

To help children's recovery, parents should:

> Be a role model. Try to remain calm, so your child can learn from you how to handle stressful situations.
> Monitor adult conversations. Be aware of what adults are saying about the hurricane or the damage. Children may misinterpret what they hear and be unnecessarily frightened.
> Limit media exposure. Protect your child from too many images of the hurricane, including those on television, on the internet, on radio, and in the newspaper.
> Reassure children they are safe. You may need to repeat this frequently even after the hurricane passes. Spend extra time with them, playing games outside, reading together indoors, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell them you love them.
> Replace lost or damaged toys as soon as you are able.
> Calm worries about their friends' safety. Even though phones may not be working, reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them, just the way they are being taken care of by you.
> Tell children about community recovery. Reassure children that things are being done to restore electricity, phones, water, and gas. Tell them that the town or city will be removing debris and helping families find housing.
> Take care of your children's health. Help them get enough rest, exercise, and healthy food. Be sure they have a balance of quiet and physical activities.
> Maintain regular daily life. Even in the midst of disruption and change, children feel more secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, keep to regular mealtimes and bedtimes.
> Maintain expectations. Stick to your family rules about good behavior and respect for others. Continue family chores, but keep in mind that children may need more reminding than usual.
> Encourage children to help. Children cope better and recover sooner if they feel they are helping out. Give them small clean-up tasks or other ways to contribute. Afterward, provide activities that are not related to the hurricane, such as playing cards or reading.
>Be extra patient once children have returned to school. They may be more distracted and need extra help with homework for a while.

>Give support at bedtime. Children may be more anxious at times of separation from parents. Spend a little more time talking, cuddling, or reading than usual...

>Help with boredom. Daily activities, such as watching television, playing on the computer, and having friends over, may have been disrupted. Extracurricular activities, like sports and or dance classes, may have been suspended. Help children think of alternative activities to do...

>Keep things hopeful. Even in the most difficult situation, it is important to remain optimistic about the future. Your positive outlook will help your children be able to see good things in the world around them. This will help get them through even the most challenging times.

>Seek professional help if your child still has difficulties more than six weeks after the hurricane.

From *Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after a Hurricane*
National Child Traumatic Stress Network. [http://www.NCTSNet.org](http://www.NCTSNet.org)

“Students who have been through a hurricane often have difficulties with concentration, attention, and behavior. Some students may be very quiet and withdrawn, while others may be disruptive and overly active. Many will have difficulties with learning.

  • Modify lesson plans. They may have to be adapted over the recovery period to reduce the class’s workload, move at a slower pace, and be more enjoyable.

  • Communicate with students. Be open to talking with students about their feelings and concerns about the hurricane. It is important to provide accurate factual information to help clarify misunderstandings and reduce fear. End the discussion with focus on current safety procedures and helpful plans for coping.

  • Know your students’ experiences. It is important to invite students and parents to let you know when a student is affected by some change in his or her personal life so that you can better understand any change in classroom behavior or school performance.

  • Share information with others. It is important for teachers to speak with one another and other school staff to share information and monitor how students are doing.

  • Provide structure. Maintain a predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences to provide support and consistency for your students.

  • Refer distressed students for help. Teachers should encourage distressed students to meet with the school counselor, social worker, or nurse.

  • Encourage your students. Teachers should encourage students to get appropriate rest and exercise and to eat a healthy diet.

  • Set limits on anger. It is especially difficult for teachers to have students acting irritably or being disruptive, which may occur after a hurricane or any distressing event. One way to handle irritable, disruptive, or aggressive behavior is to be clear about the behavior that is expected and reinforce age-appropriate anger-management and conflict-resolution concepts to ensure a climate of nonviolence.

  • Reduce reminders. Teachers should reduce their student’s exposure to unnecessary reminders of the hurricane. This includes limiting teacher-to-teacher conversations about the hurricane in front of students and limiting their exposure to television stories and images of the hurricane during class time.
• Identify sleep problems. Many students may suffer from lack of restful sleep. Tired students often cannot concentrate or learn well and can be irritable with friends and teachers. If a student is having any of these problems, it is important to ask them and their parents or caretakers about their sleep.

• Be patient. Recovery comes in stages over weeks and months. Don’t become discouraged because some students take more time than others or have temporary setbacks.

• Promote prosocial activities. It is very important to engage preadolescents and adolescents in prosocial activities to help rebuild their school community and social life. Prosocial activities are important to building a sense of community and citizenship. These activities can include a project to help improve their school or neighborhood or a project to help others in their community.”

Do you have resources that you would like us to share with others related to hurricanes or other natural disasters? Please send them to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Is there something you need as your work with schools, families, staff, students recovering from the recent hurricanes? Please let us know. Ltaylor@ucla.edu

As noted above, we plan to follow-up with specifics on our weekly Mental Health in Schools Practitioner Listserv. If you would like to be included in this weekly sharing of specific concerns and sharing from mental health in schools practitioners, please let us know. Just reply to this email or Email smhp@ucla.edu and ask to be added to the Practitioners’ Listserv.