

## Chapter 8. Crises Assistance and Prevention

*There cannot be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.*

Henry Kissinger

**C**risis, emergency, disaster, catastrophe, tragedy, trauma – all are words heard frequently at schools today. Too many schools have had a major crisis; any school may have one soon.

Besides natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, and pandemic diseases, students experience violence and death related to suicide, gang activity, snipers, hostage-taking, and rape. Some students and staff react with severe emotional responses – fear, grief, post traumatic stress syndrome. And, when a significant portion of a school’s population is affected, major facets of a school’s functioning are jeopardized. When too little effort is made to intervene, the aftermath can interfere with school and home performance, and long-term psychosocial and educational problems may ensue.

Crisis intervention is for responding to, minimizing the impact of, and preventing school and personal crises. After a crisis, the first concern is to ensure physical safety and medical first aid; this is followed immediately by attention to psychological considerations. Then, the emphasis is on the school’s need to regain stability and a sense of normalcy so that students and staff can resume learning and teaching. This includes attending to follow-up care as needed.

Districts differ in the specificity with which they spell out procedures for schools to follow during and in the aftermath of a crisis. Based on district policy, schools plan for emergencies. It is rare, however, for districts to have addressed, in sufficient detail, policies and procedures for what to do in the days and weeks that follow a crisis event and what to do to prevent future occurrences when feasible.

Districts also differ in the amount of support they provide in helping schools establish and maintain crisis response mechanisms (e.g., crisis teams) and in training staff, as well as how much district level staffing is available for crisis intervention. Some, usually larger districts, may have regional support crisis teams that provide crisis management, medical and psychological/counseling support services, media relations, and debriefing. Others provide only an immediate response.

The proper handling of school crises is essential to minimizing negative impact on learning and physical and mental health. Comprehensive crisis intervention planning and implementation provides ways for school personnel, students, and families to return to normalcy as quickly as feasible, address residual (longer-term) psychosocial problems, and explore preventive measures for the future.

Examples of crisis intervention include activity designed to minimize the personal and institutional impact of crises and establish

- a safe and productive school environment (e.g., that deters violence and reduces injury)
- emergency/crisis responses at a site
- collaboration with local schools (e.g., an elementary to high school feeder pattern) and the community at-large for crisis planning and response and to develop and implement strategies to enhance safety and reduce violence, bullying, child abuse, suicide
- follow-up care when needed
- a violence prevention and resiliency curriculum designed to teach students anger management, problem-solving skills, social skills, and conflict resolution.

## FRAMING AND DESIGNING CRISES ASSISTANCE AND PREVENTION

Exhibit 8.1 presents a prototype framework to help plan crisis assistance and prevention. (Go to the resources referenced at the end of this chapter for specific intervention ideas related to each of these concerns.)

**Exhibit 8.1**  
**Prototype Framework for Crises Assistance and Prevention**

		<i>Scope of Event</i>		
		Major School-wide crisis*	Small Group Crisis**	Individual Crisis***
<i>Phases for which to plan</i>	During the Emergency			
	Immediate Aftermath			
	Days/Weeks Following			
	Prevention in the Future			

\*Major school-wide crisis (e.g., major earthquake, fire in building, gun violence on campus)

\*\*Small group crisis (e.g., in events where most students are unaffected such as a classmate's death, the focus is on providing for *specific* classes, groups, and individuals who are upset)

\*\*\*Individual crisis (e.g., student confides threat to hurt self or others such as suicide, assault)

Clearly, the scope of the event (major school-wide crises as contrasted to small group or individual crises) profoundly shapes the number of responders needed during the various phases of the crisis. Furthermore, problems requiring attention during the crisis are quite distinct from those arising in the immediate aftermath and in the days and weeks following the event (e.g., hysteria and fear as contrasted with grief reactions and post traumatic stress).

As with every intervention, multi-year strategic development requires gap analyses and priority setting and feasibility considerations. And, as with all student and learning supports, the work is strengthened when a broad range of stakeholders and resources are coalesced to help with planning and implementation (e.g., students, staff, home, police, medical, and other community resources).

## WHAT ARE PRIORITIES IN ENHANCING CRISES ASSISTANCE AND PREVENTION?

The prototype framework in Exhibit 8.1 can guide gap analysis and setting priorities for intervention, personnel development, and ongoing support. For more specific examples to aid gap analysis, see the self-study survey in Appendix D.

The first priority is to *upgrade crisis intervention planning and response capability*. This can be done by a school's administration or by establishing a standing crisis response and prevention workgroup. In some districts, a school-based crisis intervention team is delineated as the key planning and implementation mechanism. Planning groups vary in size; they benefit from the participation of an administrator, student support staff (e.g., nurse, psychologist, counselor), and anyone with special expertise from the district and community.

Early tasks include

- reviewing strategic and action plans for crisis response and prevention
- preparing all at a school for responding to the different types of emergencies and making specific assignments and building capacity for crowd management, immediate medical and psychological first aid, rumor control, and handling media
- preparing all at a school to implement recovery efforts so students can resume learning and staff can resume their duties
- designing and building capacity for immediate aftermath counseling and debriefing

As the above basics are accomplished, the workgroup can enhance plans and capacity for

- providing brief and longer-term follow-up care as necessary
- preventing what is readily preventable.

### About Reviewing Strategic and Action Plans

Every school needs crisis assistance and prevention plans that establish specific responses and delineate capacity building for implementation. The focus in strategic and action planning is on such matters as:

- who will assume what roles and functions in responding to a crisis
- what types of events the school defines as a crisis warranting a school-based response
- what defines a particular event as a crisis
- how will different facets of crisis response be handled (who, what, where)
- how to assess and triage medical and psychological trauma
- how to identify students and staff in need of aftermath intervention
- what types of responses will be made with respect to students, staff, parents, district, community, media
- what special provisions will be implemented to address language and cultural considerations
- which school personnel will respond
- how district and community resources will be used
- which personnel will review the adequacy of each response and make appropriate revisions in crises response plans
- what in-service staff development and training are needed and how will it be implemented
- how will everyone be informed about emergency and crisis procedures

Planning also addresses contingencies. What will be done if someone is not at school to carry out specified crisis response duties? What if a location is not accessible for a planned activity?

School crises, of course, often are community crises. Therefore, the school's plan should be coordinated with other local schools and with community crisis response personnel. The ideal is to seamlessly interweave plans and resources to enhance the benefits of the wider range of expertise and increase cost-effectiveness.

Once a general response plan is made planners can, over time, work out further details related to specific concerns and how to prevent what is preventable. In doing so, priority is given to high frequency and high impact concerns, such as wide-spread interpersonal violence.

### **About Ensuring Effective Immediate Crisis Response**

Action planning focuses on establishing and preparing a *response team* to

- organize planning and training sessions for all at a school
- provide overall coordination during a crisis response
- liaison with district and school administrators and with community emergency response agencies (e.g., fire department, police, emergency medical teams).

The plan also designates which responders will take on roles and functions related to

- mobilizing the team when needed (e.g., telephone trees, email listservs)
- coordinating communications and controlling rumors
- first aid (medical, psychological)
- crowd management
- media
- evacuation and transportation
- individual and group supportive counseling
- aftermath interventions

and so forth.

Every role and function needs to be backed-up by 1-2 team members in case someone is absent or incapacitated. Team contact information must be posted in visible places (e.g., next to phones and computers in office locations).

***There's never time to  
plan things right.***



***True, but there's always time  
to do things wrong!***



Note: While training for delivering medical first aid is fairly commonplace, relatively little attention is paid to preparing responders to administer psychological first aid. To correct this oversight, Exhibit 8.2 provides an overview from a guide prepared by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD.

## **Exhibit 8.2**

### **About Psychological First Aid in Schools**

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD have made the Psychological First Aid for Schools Field Operations Guide\* and accompanying handouts available online <http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid-schoolspfa>

Psychological First Aid for Schools is an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the aftermath of a school crisis, disaster, or terrorism event.

The guide is divided into the following sections:

- Introduction and Overview
- Preparing to Deliver Psychological First Aid
- The Core Actions
  - Contact and Engagement
  - Safety and Comfort
  - Stabilization
  - Information Gathering: Current Needs and Concerns
  - Practical Assistance
  - Connection with Social Supports
  - Information on Coping
  - Linkage with Collaborative Services
- Appendices

As stated in the manual:

**“The basic objectives of a Psychological First Aid provider in schools are:**

- To establish a positive connection with students and staff members in a non-intrusive, compassionate manner
- To enhance immediate and ongoing safety and provide physical and emotional comfort
- To calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or distraught students and staff
- To help students and staff members identify their immediate needs and concerns
- To offer practical assistance and information to help students and staff members address their immediate needs and concerns
- To connect students and staff members as soon as possible to social support networks, including family members, friends, coaches, and other school or community groups
- To empower students, staff, and families to take an active role in their recovery, by acknowledging their coping efforts and strengths, and supporting adaptive coping
- To make clear your availability and (when appropriate) link the student and staff to other relevant school or community resources such as school counseling services, peer support programs, afterschool activities, tutoring, primary care physicians, local recovery systems, mental health services, employee assistance programs, public-sector services, and other relief organizations

(cont.)

**Core actions are:**

1. Contact and Engagement  
Goal: To initiate contacts or to respond to contacts by students and staff in a non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful manner
2. Safety and Comfort  
Goal: To enhance immediate and ongoing safety, and provide physical and emotional comfort
3. Stabilization (if needed)  
Goal: To calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or disoriented students and staff
4. Information Gathering: (Current Needs and Concerns)  
Goal: To identify immediate needs and concerns, gather additional information, and tailor Psychological First Aid for Schools interventions to meet these needs
5. Practical Assistance  
Goal: To offer practical help to students and staff in addressing immediate needs and concerns
6. Connection with Social Supports  
Goal: To help establish brief or ongoing contacts with primary support persons or other sources of support, including family, friends, teachers, and other school and/or community resources
7. Information on Coping  
Goal: To provide information about stress reactions and coping to reduce distress and promote adaptive functioning
8. Linkage with Collaborative Services  
Goal: To link students and staff with available services needed at the time or in the future

These core actions of Psychological First Aid for Schools constitute the basic objectives of providing early assistance within hours, days, or weeks following an event.”

The manual stresses the importance of being flexible and devoting the amount of time spent on each core action based on the person’s specific needs and concerns.

\*Brymer M., Taylor M., Escudero P., Jacobs A., Kronenberg M., Macy R., Mock L., Payne L., Pynoos R., & Vogel J. *Psychological first aid for schools: Field operations guide, 2nd Edition*. (2012). Los Angeles: National Child Traumatic Stress Network.  
[http://www.nctsnet.org/sites/default/files/pfa/school/1-PFA\\_for\\_Schools\\_final.pdf](http://www.nctsnet.org/sites/default/files/pfa/school/1-PFA_for_Schools_final.pdf)

## **About Designing Recovery Efforts**

The aftermath of any crisis may affect a significant segment of a school's stakeholders. Of particular concern is the need for rumor control, dealing with contagion effects, and providing support for anyone experiencing medical problems and strong psychological reactions. Recovery planning and action focuses on specific steps to be taken in the ensuing days/weeks. The emphasis is on:

- (1) Preparing and circulating accurate information to minimize destructive/disruptive rumors. An example is providing teachers with accurate information about the event and asking them to judiciously cover the matter with their students. The point is not only to provide accurate information about the event, but to clarify that the feelings students are having are natural and to remind students of available resources. Provision should be made to back up teachers (e.g., those who feel their situation requires someone with specific skills). The same type of information is relevant for staff and families.
- (2) Preparing and circulating a handout to all school personnel regarding what they should watch for in the aftermath and what they can do if anyone appears especially upset.
- (3) Implementing classroom discussions and activities that enable students to express and discuss feelings about crises.
- (4) Implementing counseling and other special supports for classes, groups, and individuals.

Special expertise may be required in handling problems that arise in the days and weeks following an event. If there is not anyone with the needed expertise at the school, referrals are indicated.

As soon as feasible, planners meet for a debriefing session to evaluate how procedures worked, what revisions are needed, and to clarify preventive implications.

## **About Brief and Longer-term Follow-up**

For some at a school, extended counseling and other special supports are needed. See Chapter 9 for the processes involved in providing student and family special assistance. Processes similar to those presented can be established for affected staff.

## **Preventing What is Readily Preventable**

Prevention is a fundamental element of well-designed crises planning. Prevention strategies play a significant role in creating an environment in which a positive school climate can emerge.

A major focus of prevention is on strategies for deterring violence and reducing injury (e.g., violence prevention and resiliency curriculum; initiatives for conflict resolution and restorative justice). Another facet is concern for enhancing resiliency in the form of enhanced motivation and capacity for coping with stress. At all times, the emphasis is on minimizing circumstances that undermine personal well-being (e.g., threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to significant others).

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS FOR CHAPTER 8

In the context of transforming student and learning supports, developing the highlighted range of school-based crisis intervention requires more than a typical emergency/crisis response team. Where such a team is in place, it needs to be expanded into a broad-based workgroup charged with planning, development, implementation, ongoing evaluation, and quality improvement related to crisis assistance and prevention. This type of standing workgroup can ensure effective connection with the other five learning supports arenas and with the district, neighboring schools, and the surrounding community.

The workgroup will need members who have or will develop the specific expertise related to crises assistance and prevention. Some members of such a workgroup are natural participants because of their formal role at a school and their expertise (e.g., a school administrator, nurse, psychologist, social worker, counselor); in addition, there almost always are other staff who have special expertise and will be interested in participating (e.g., those with first aid and counseling training, those concerned with school climate and safety).

Optimally, the district should provide not only policy and procedural guidelines, but also district support staff to help workgroups formulate specific plans, organize and train designated responders, and coordinate with relevant district and community resources. And if any schools cannot generate a standing crisis assistance and prevention workgroup, the district and neighboring schools can pool resources to meet the need.

**For more specific examples of ways to enhance *Crisis Assistance and Prevention*, see the self-study survey in Appendix D. (Also accessible at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/toolsforpractice/crissurvey.pdf>)**

### **For Free and Easily Accessed Online Resources Related to *Crisis Assistance and Prevention***

See the special section on our website:

>*Responding to a Crisis*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/crisisresp.htm>

See our Center's Resource Aid on

>*Responding to a Crisis at a School*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/crisis/crisis.pdf>

See our Center's Quick Finds on

>*Crisis Prevention and Response*

[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2107\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2107_01.htm)

>*Prevention*

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/prevention.html>

Also see related topics listed on the Quick Find menu

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

**Each of the above contains citations to references used in preparing this chapter.**