Psychological First Aid

Teachers and Educators

When Disaster Strikes
School violence and natural disasters happen in other teachers’ schools. You just can’t see it happening in your school or on your campus. Then the day comes and you find yourself in the middle of a crisis.

One minute it’s a typical day. The next you’re trying to move students and others to a safe location.

Students are depending on you, and you feel the responsibility in a way you never could have imagined. Every second counts. You speak words of encouragement to keep students and colleagues calm. The danger has finally passed.

Your school has been transformed; it’s nothing you recognize. You orient yourself; lead your group away from the building. It’s then you realize some are injured, some of the students and your colleagues are stunned into a strange silence, and some are shaking and crying.

Parents are arriving on the scene and frantically looking for their children, and children are searching for their parents, siblings, and friends.

Spouses of school faculty and staff members are also trying to locate their loved ones.

The situation is heart wrenching and you feel you must help. What can you do in the minutes, hours, and days following such a tragedy?

Psychological First Aid in Your School
In the face of such a tragedy, you can offer comfort care and assistance to those around you by using Psychological First Aid (PFA). Think about the diversity before you with so many people from varying life circumstances all faced with the consequences of the disaster they share in common.
PFA in Practice

Reach out to those who need help and provide comfort care.

- Recognize and attend to your students’ and colleagues’ existing medical conditions.
- Help your students locate their parents, guardians, siblings, or friends as soon as the situation allows it.
- Offer immediate assistance to distressed individuals by looking for ways to keep them comfortable (e.g., providing blankets and water or directing them to a place to sit).
- Help your colleagues connect with their family members.

Validate feelings and thoughts.

- Listen and hear what your students and colleagues have to say by being fully present and attentive.
- Allow them to talk as little or as much as they care to. Try not to push too hard to get them to talk about what happened or how they are feeling.
- Avoid the temptation to judge the rightness or wrongness of their reactions.

Provide accurate and timely information.

- Provide accurate information in response to questions as soon as you can.
- Treat all questions seriously and offer truthful answers.
- Avoid the temptation to ignore questions that seem unimportant.
- Gauge the amount of information students can process; wait until they ask a question before providing details of the situation.

Connect children with support systems.

- Reunite students with family members, including siblings attending the same school, parents, guardians, and friends.
- Contact medical professionals who can help with physical conditions and medication needs.
- Seek help from mental health professionals, especially if your students or co-workers exhibit risky or dangerous behaviors or request to see a counselor.

Provide education about stress responses.

- Help individuals understand that the stress they may be experiencing in response to the situation will lessen with time.
- Encourage individuals to seek help from a physician, school guidance counselor, or other mental health professional.
- Exercise caution that you don’t minimize an individual’s reactions.

Reinforce strengths and positive coping strategies.

- Encourage parents, students, and co-workers to get back to routine activities as soon as practical.
- Suggest that individuals choose healthy foods and minimize the amount of junk food they eat.
- Encourage parents, students, and co-workers to engage in physical activities and to combine these activities with useful tasks.

PFA is a way to give emotional support and help to people of any age or background in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

You know from day-to-day teaching experiences that each person has unique characteristics. Despite this, you can use PFA to meet the basic needs of people in stressful situations, no matter what the differences are among them. PFA will provide you with strategies to help people cope with their pressing concerns and needs in the days and weeks after the disaster.