

# Crisis Care: Helping Students and Staff Recover

*District officials are challenged to help staff and students feel safe and secure after a crisis.*

By Vivian Marinelli



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**W**hether a severe weather situation, an active shooter, or a large-scale evacuation, a crisis can occur at any time with little or no warning.

When a school community experiences a crisis, the effects ripple across the campus and beyond. Students, teachers, staff, parents, volunteers, and local community members will feel the impact and each will respond differently. The goal is for school officials to take action to ensure staff and students are safe, families and community members are notified, and help is available for those affected by the incident.

## Information Is Key

After a crisis incident, school officials can expect to be bombarded with questions from parents, the media, and the community. As part of a crisis plan, the communications team is tasked with releasing accurate information as soon as it is available and continuously providing updates.

Communication should begin by stating the current impact of the event and the response. Detail the next steps, and explain what is being done to assist those affected. The school community and the public should know where they can find updates and available resources for

recovery, such as the school website or social media platforms.

All statements should include coping strategies to soothe the healing process. Keeping the community informed will help control panic and uncertainty as well as guide individuals on how to move forward and stay safe.

## Diverse Reactions

Every school community is a diverse ecosystem of varying ages, ethnicities, cultures, personalities, and emotions. Each person experiences trauma differently and some of the responses may be unpredictable. This is important to remember when working with children who may feel especially vulnerable if the crisis separates them from their parents during an unfamiliar situation.

Some normal physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions among students and staff after a traumatic event include:

- Normal physical reactions
  - Fight or flight response
  - Increased sensory acuity
  - Hyperventilation/dizziness
  - Trembling/shaking
  - Nausea/vomiting
  - Insomnia
  - Nightmares
  - Headaches and/or aches and pains
- Normal psychological reactions
  - Shock, numbing, or denial
  - Time distortion

- Panic/anger
- Feelings of helplessness or lack of control
- Inability to return to usual activities
- Normal behavioral reactions
  - Irritability and/or outbursts of anger
  - Crying
  - Indecisiveness
  - Withdrawal
  - Expressions of guilt over actions or inactions

There is no textbook reaction to trauma—each reaction will be as unique and varied as the individuals who experienced the trauma. Explain to students that their reactions are normal responses and not a reason to feel ashamed. Take note of specific reactions and share them with parents and school counselors as well as on-site counselors who are trained to provide assistance in a manner aimed to prevent long-term psychological complications.

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### Psychological First Aid

No matter the type of crisis, it is essential to ensure everyone impacted feels supported. This is especially important for younger students who may be experiencing a traumatic event for the first time.

The Medical Reserve Corps, a national network of volunteers organized locally to improve the health and safety of their communities, recommends psychological first aid (PFA) as a standard model of mental health intervention in early response to disasters and other traumatic events.

To respond to children’s varying reactions, counselors trained in PFA adapt their approaches to accommodate a wide range of age-appropriate behavior and emotions. With PFA, a behavioral health professional assesses the needs and concerns of individuals and provides support that is nonintrusive and compassionate.

The professional talks through the individual’s feelings, assuring them that the feelings are normal responses to an abnormal event. The counselor then

connects each person to specific information and resources to help them cope. Providing supportive coping efforts encourages an active role in recovery.

In the event of a crisis, seeking help from a third party to identify and provide on-site counselors trained in administering PFA should help your school community regain a sense of predictability, comfort, safety, and control, and reduce feelings of isolation and helplessness.

### Don’t Forget About Yourself

In a school environment, putting students’ safety first is always a top priority. It is important to provide extra care to help them heal properly after a traumatic event. While doing this, it’s easy to forget about yourself. As an adult involved in a school crisis, remember to keep your needs in mind for your own personal resilience. Your effectiveness in working with and responding to others will be determined by how well you take care of yourself.

Have a clear understanding of your responsibilities and don’t overexert yourself. Listen to your body for signs of stress such as headaches, nervousness, difficulty concentrating or sleeping, and abnormal fatigue. This is your body’s way of telling you to slow down. Most of all, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Remember, the more resilient you are, the more you are able to be there for your staff, students and family.

### Supporting Recovery

Schools are meant to be places where children feel safe. When a traumatic event occurs within a school environment, children are left feeling confused, scared, and vulnerable. It is important to be prepared with a crisis plan in place and proper training to prepare staff and students on how to react before, during and after a crisis situation.

On-site counselors trained in PFA play an essential role in helping those affected regain a sense of predictability, control, comfort, and safety. They also help prevent any long-term psychological damage, which is especially important for young, impressionable children and their educators. Partnering with an organization experienced in supporting the recovery of those impacted by crisis shows your families, community members and children that you care about their well-being and are prepared to return their school into a safe haven for them to grow and learn once again.

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