

After a Disaster: How Students Can Help Themselves and Each Other

Those who were exposed to a terrifying event are shocked to a greater or lesser extent. An entire community, a whole school can be impacted. You may feel no longer safe and thrown out of your normal routine. This document will explain what happens to us after a disaster, why we react in ways we may not have known before. It will also describe ways in which we can cope with unusual reactions.

What is a trauma?

In the stone age humans reacted by running away, fighting or pretending to be dead. These reactions were called “flight”, “fight”, or “freeze”.

Today when we are confronted with a situation when our life is threatened or we endangered as a person, e.g. extremely humiliated or excluded from others, we react in the same way as when mankind lived in the open nature. Being humiliated or excluded endangered our lives in the past because we could more easily survive together with fellows. We call the effect of terrifying situations trauma and we know about trauma reactions and how we can deal with them.

A traumatizing incident is the confrontation with an event with the following criteria:

A person who experienced, saw or was confronted with an event causing or threatening death. It can be as well the injury of somatic or psychic integrity of the person. Since we are empathetic it can be also the death or injury or the threat of these two dangers for another person which cause trauma reactions.

When the situation occurs everyone is shocked at first, some more some less depending on different personalities and personal former relevant experience. The more difficult situations someone overcame successfully the more he will overcome the new shock.

Trauma reactions

The reactions caused by this natural reflex that is meant to preserve our lives and integrity. We have to decide within a second either to fight or flee. If none of the two reactions is possible we are paralyzed, unable to act properly. Kinds of reactions vary from one to another.

The following reactions may occur among others:

Fear, panic depression, helplessness, anger, wrath, guilt feelings, shame, sleeping problems, digestion problems, headaches ...

confusion, disorientation, concentration problems, less able to solve problems ...

aggression, alcohol/drugs, wanting to be alone, unable to cope with daily routines ...

Duration of trauma reactions

We must know that reactions are most intense near the event and gradually pass by afterwards in days or weeks. When they have not passed away after 4 – 6 weeks we should ask someone who can help us handle these reactions better. Your teacher, parent, older friends, the counselor, the school psychologist, social worker might help you find the right one.

We should also respect reactions from others as we want ours to be respected by others. To be accepted either being quicker or slower in being able to cope or reaction differently helps a lot to feel safe and supported by others of our age and not excluded. If friends of yours have difficulties to respect other reactions encourage them to try. It will help them as well if they are able to accept others' reactions. The event will never be forgotten and we will be able to go on.

Coping strategies: BASIC Ph

Psychologists have done a lot of research to find out what helps people to cope with life threatening situations. They found six different ways how to cope with extreme stress properly. Everyone has access to them but everyone has preferred ways and others which are less used. Sometimes we do not believe that what helped us before in stressing situations will not help after a really life threatening event. We know it does!

These different ways of coping for youngsters being the same as for adults are the following:

Six coping styles

Belief (B) You believe that you will be able to recover from the stress of such a situation. This may be because of having overcome great difficulties in the past or because you are generally optimistic about your abilities and feel strong.

Some may be supported by their religious belief and find solace in spiritual ceremonies or praying, believing that you are safe in the hands of God. It is important to respect the beliefs of others.

It may be helpful for us to join ceremony with others though we do not believe the same as they do.

Affect (A) When we express our feelings or emotions and they are accepted we feel integrated and part of a group. Whatever feelings come up they will not stay forever. Though, it is necessary to accept them. We can express our feelings in different ways either non-verbally or in words, in pictures. We may like to listen to music which expresses our feelings. Mostly we like to express our feelings with others whom we like. When we have gone through a terrible experience it can be helpful to share feelings with those who experienced the same event.

We should know that grief is a process not an event, meaning it does not occur at a certain time and then it is over but it comes and goes again and again. It may change over the times, e.g. become less intense or less accepting what has happened and cannot be changed anymore. Sometimes grief becomes even more intense after a while when reality has changed for us because of the event.

Social (S) For many people contact to friends and family is the reason for them to be able to go on in their lives. They know that they can share beliefs, feelings and concerns. They know they can get practical help and share their everyday life with them gradually coming back to normalcy together. Together we can eat, drink, celebrate, work, play, laugh and weep, tell stories and have fun or go through difficult situations.

For some time after a shocking event we may rather not be in company and rather be, think, feel within ourselves. We should accept if that is so with our friends knowing that it will last for some time and then come back to normal.

Tragedies often bring about a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from others offering help. It will help us, too, if we have ideas how to help others among our friends, class, school.

Imagination (I) We can dream and imagine almost everything. In stories we invent we can find solace.

Writing, painting, drawing, music, role playing can express feelings and hope in the future.

Older students might find “gallows” humor helpful to deal with a recent community tragedy.

Creatively using different materials, resources, environment can be a substantial support in times of grief and sorrow.

Cognitive (C) When we understand why something happened and why we react in a certain way, and - even more important - what we can do to handle the situation appropriately we often feel better.

Explaining literature can be helpful and plans for the future or plans how an event as it happened could be prevented in future. This handout has the same intention: to understand and to spread knowledge about copings.

Going on in lessons may something else that is helpful. It helps to think of something else and our understanding and thinking is asked for. Lack of concentration can make us less successful, at least for a while.

Physiological (Ph) Most children like activities, whether sports or just running around, or doing games.

And children like diversity and change. Physical activity of any kind will be useful. Activities of any kind will help to overcome the feeling of helplessness that is often felt in tragic events. They take us away from remembering terrible things and getting step by step back to normalcy, e.g. the normal routines of eating, drinking and sleeping. Help yourself by getting back to the normal everyday routines.

Use mental health services

When you feel bad

- really very intensely (e.g. unusually depressed or anxious)
- or for a long time

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