

Phases:

- Prevention
- Preparedness
- Response
- Recovery

Audiences:

- Administrators**
- Teachers and Staff**
- Parents/Guardians

## Communication #21

### Handout: Tips for High School Teachers for Helping Your Students

As a teacher, you are in an excellent position to help your students following a disaster.

Just as you help connect students with appropriate academic and counseling services under normal circumstances, you are in an excellent position to help your students return to school, stay in school, continue to learn, and return to their usual school-based activities after a pandemic

#### What to expect from your students:

- Feelings of anxiety, fears, worries about safety of self and others.
- Discomfort with feelings of vulnerability.
- Changes in behavior: increased activity level, decreased concentration and/or attention, withdrawal, irritability with friends, teachers, events, angry outbursts, aggression, absenteeism.
- Changes in school performance.
- Increased risk for substance abuse.
- Repetitive thoughts and comments about death and dying (including suicidal thoughts).

#### What you can do to help:

- Reinforce ideas of safety and security, even though many high school students will not verbalize fears around these issues.
- Maintain a predictable class schedule and rules to provide support and consistency for the students.
- Listen to and tolerate your students retelling of events. Schedule specific times for discussion during the school day to allow for opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings. Set limits on scary talk.
- Talk to your students about what is being done by the school and community to keep everyone safe from harm.
- Limit access to live television and the Internet that show disturbing images of the event. Discuss students' perceptions of media descriptions of events.
- After any discussion, end the discussion with a focus on their current safety and a calming activity, such as taking deep breaths, or having a moment of quiet reflection.
- Encourage students to talk about confusing feelings, worries, daydreams, and disruptions of concentration by accepting feelings, listening carefully, and reminding students that these are normal reactions following a scary event.
- As students try to process the events, they may ask questions that may be initially shocking to adults. Try to respond in a calm manner, answering questions in simple, direct terms and helping students to transition back to their activity.
- Students may misunderstand information about the event as they are trying to

- make sense of what has happened (is happening). For example, they may blame themselves, believe things happened that did not happen, etc. Gently help students develop a realistic understanding of the event.
- Students may ask the same types of questions repeatedly, which can be confusing and/or frustrating for teachers. Understand that students may need to hear the information multiple times before being able to integrate and understand it. Give the students time to cope with fears.
  - Expect some angry outbursts from the students. Try to catch students before they "act out," by taking them aside, and helping them calm down and regain control of their behavior.
  - Do classroom activities that will reinforce the message that one person can make a difference to help and heal. Activities can include drawing pictures and sending cards or class projects of collecting pennies or aluminum cans.
  - Encourage some distraction times, which would include doing schoolwork that does not require high levels of new learning, as well as enjoyable activities. Help students do activities that allow them to experience mastery and build self-esteem.
  - Expect some brief temporary declines in the students' school performance. Consider reducing the homework and testing as the nation heals and the national routine is stabilized.
  - Provide reassurance to the students that feelings will get smaller and easier to handle over time.
  - Expect and understand students' regression (acting younger) and other difficult behaviors that are not typical of the students.
  - Maintain communication with other teachers, school personnel, and parents to monitor how the students are coping with the demands of school, home, and community activities.
  - Remain aware of your own reactions to students' trauma. It is okay to express emotions to your students, such as "I am feeling sad about what happened (is happening)." However, if you are feeling overwhelmed with emotion, it is important to take care of yourself and to seek support from other teachers and staff.

*Compiled by Robin H. Gurwich, Ph.D., Jane F. Silovsky, Ph.D., Shelli Schultz, Ph.D.,  
Michelle Kees, Ph.D., & Sarah Burlingame, B.A.  
Department of Pediatrics  
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center*