

Helping Children Heal After A Traumatic Event: Suggestions for the Classroom

What should I do in my classroom after a traumatic event occurs?

Building a Supportive Environment

Children will benefit greatly from adequate support and caring expressed by the adults in their lives. As a teacher, you have the opportunity to contribute significantly to the recovery of an emotionally traumatized child. Strive to create an atmosphere in the classroom that fosters respect for each other's feelings and fears, and allows for a supportive, healing environment. This type of ongoing and always present environment will help your students to be more resilient should a traumatic event occur.

What To Say

- Let the children ask questions.
- Acknowledge the frightening parts of the disaster.
- Do not falsely minimize the danger.
- Explain the events in words children understand.
- Let the children know that you will be available to talk with them.
- Reassure children that they are loved and will be taken care of.

What To Do

Turn off the TV! Limit children's and teens' exposure to TV and radio coverage of the event. Over-exposure to images or descriptions can be harmful.

Take Action! Part of what makes a mass casualty event traumatic is that people feel powerless to prevent or stop the suffering of others. Empower children to help support and heal the victims by participating in writing cards, organizing food drives, collecting clothes, etc.

Seeking Professional Help

Most children are resilient and, with time and a supportive environment, will recover from a traumatic experience. However, if you notice after a couple of weeks that a student seems to have become "stuck" on the trauma, and reactions to the event or new behaviors are interfering with school, then the student may be in need of assistance from a mental health professional. Refer the student to a school mental health professional, counselor, or nurse. Remember to always talk with the student's family first and convey to them your concern and recommended action.

Information About Expressive Techniques

For many reasons, survivors of trauma may not feel able to talk about their situations and/or feelings. For example, young children may not have the language to express themselves. Older children may experience guilt or shame, which leaves them tongue-tied. Expressive techniques can help children and adults approach issues when talking is difficult. Professional expressive therapists use art, movement, writing, music, dance, or play to help children explore within



themselves and provide us access to their thoughts and feelings. Expressive techniques also help children to:

- Understand how others are feeling.

- Think, plan, and problem solve in an organized and clear manner.

- Gain independence, selfcompetence, and perseverance.

- Explore different outcomes, different points of view, and future hopes. Unlike their lives, which have been irreversibly changed, they can use expressive techniques to look into the "what if's" and the "what now" of their situations.

With appropriate guidance from a professional expressive therapist, you can use expressive **techniques** in your classroom to help children express how they are feeling, manage symptoms of stress, and reach out to others. Contact a professional expressive therapist for information about appropriate activities to use in your classroom.

Remember to Manage Your Own Stress!

If you want to help the children in your classroom, you must take care of your own mental and emotional health needs.

It is natural that you too will be affected emotionally by a traumatic event. Children are tuned into the fear and worries of adults. If you do not make an effort to alleviate or address your own emotional distress, you could possibly heighten your students' levels of anxiety. Some suggestions for taking care of yourself include:

- Set realistic goals for what you can accomplish each day.

- Focus on what you can control.

- Establish priorities and pace yourself.

- Celebrate small successes personally and of your students.

- Stay flexible and have an open mind to new ideas.

- Ask for help when you need it.

- Take care of yourself by eating right, resting, and exercising.

- Nurture yourself, and do not stop enjoying family and friends.

- If you are feeling overwhelmed, seek help.

