

The 3R's of School Crises and Disasters: Readiness, Response, and Recovery

Description

A way to think about your school's level of preparedness is to measure what you have done to address the 3R's of School Crises and Disasters.

Readiness: Readiness is the level at which a school is prepared to respond to a crisis or to an emergency if the crisis or disaster were to happen today.

Response: Response is the sum total of the school's resources and skills to take decisive and effective action when a crisis situation has occurred.

Recovery: Recovery is the process of restoring the social and emotional equilibrium of the school community.

The tabs at the top of this page lead to extensive materials in each of the 3R's.

Readiness

School administrators now routinely consider ways to improve security and prevent school violence as they work to create safe environments. They also carefully plan thoughtful, effective responses to any violent incident that might occur. [Click here for an example of a checklist for school personnel to evaluate and implement the mental health component of your school crisis and emergency plan](#) [1].

Because schools vary widely in their geographic locations, physical grounds, student body, number of teachers and staff, and available resources, each should craft strategies that match its own needs.

For all schools, cooperation among school staff, community resources, and mental health providers is the most important element of a successful readiness, response, and recovery process.

During the Readiness Phase, the school must establish effective relationships with law enforcement, emergency responders, health and mental health community agencies, and local religious institutions. With solid preparation and dedicated partnership, recovery, while always challenging, can be promoted effectively.

The first step in creating relationships is to reach out to partners in the community. [Click here for a sample letter that schools may adapt to their needs as they create partnerships with mental health agencies.](#) ^[2]

Response

The Objective of the Response

The overall objective of the Response Phase is to calm the fears and anxieties of students and staff, reestablish a sense of emotional safety and security, and begin to restore a school environment that is conducive to learning. The Response Phase is the period during which the crisis intervention team members are activated to implement the school's emergency response plan. [Click here if your school has had a recent crisis](#) ^[3]

Taking Action

The mental health response to a crisis or disaster begins with assessing the exposure level of violence among students and staff. Team members should be cautious of interviewing any eyewitness to the incident until after the law enforcement investigation has been completed and security is reestablished on the school site.

Crisis team members can begin piecing together information from various sources to gain a clearer picture of where intervention efforts should begin. In the triage process, those students and staff closest to the scene of the violence should be seen first (physical proximity,) followed by those who knew the victims or the injured (emotional proximity.)

All students and staff can benefit from being educated about the normal reactions to danger and traumatic stress. In the process, response team members may discover that many students and staff have previously experienced similarly distressing life events. The current crisis may re-awaken their fears and emotional wounds, highlighting their needs for support, rest, and comfort.

Screening for at-Risk Students

One effective way to screen for those students at risk for developing additional emotional distress and symptoms that may warrant further intervention is to have students respond to a principal's letter describing what they were exposed to during the traumatic event and how they are currently coping.

[Click here for a sample screening letter from the principal that schools may adapt to their needs.](#) [2]

Responding to Students in Distress

Students who come forth with descriptions of distress in response to the sample letter or a conversation with a teacher should be referred to a school counselor, school psychologist, or school social worker for further mental health evaluation.

The report titled, *The Psychological Consequences of Terrorism*, by the "Institute of Medicine," featured the accompanying image, "The Range of Emotional, Behavioral and Cognitive Effects," which suggests that the majority of individuals exposed to an act of mass violence will experience emotional distress. A smaller number will exhibit behavioral changes in daily life, and a much smaller number will experience psychiatric illness.

Range of Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive Effects



From this model we know that the majority of students and staff will benefit from support, reassurance, and information about the normal reactions to a traumatic experience and exposure to danger.

Psychological First Aid

Psychological First Aid is an intervention that builds on concepts of children's resilience. It acknowledges the seriousness of the experience of danger and increased feelings of vulnerability that often follow exposure to a traumatic event. Students frequently fear that there will be a recurrence of the danger. An important aspect of Psychological First Aid is to reestablish the "protective shield" of adults. Crisis intervention team members can help students to understand and recognize common reactions to danger, help students verbalize their feelings, and help identify traumatic reminders that trigger renewed fears.

Psychological First Aid, administered by a skilled school mental health professional, allows for the expression of difficult feelings and assists the student in developing coping strategies and constructive actions to deal with fear and anxiety.

Click [here](#) [4] to access the Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide, Second Edition.

Supporting Teachers in the Response Phase

Meeting with teachers is essential before the crisis-counseling work with students begins. Some of the crisis team members should educate teachers about common stress reactions, including social, emotional, and behavioral changes they may observe in students in the classroom. Teachers need to know how they can refer students to school counselors, psychologists, or social workers during the day when students need additional help. Teachers should encourage students to let them know when traumatic thoughts or feelings about the incident interfere with learning. Appropriate referrals and early intervention can minimize angry or emotional outbursts and acting out that disrupt the classroom.

Working with Parents

Parents can benefit from one evening meeting that should include the following information:

- New or increased security measures at school and in the surrounding community
- Opportunities to review the school's Safe School Plan
- Crisis counseling services for students and how students can access those services during the school day
- Education about common child reactions to danger and trauma
- Information on the importance of adult role models in coping with traumatic stress
- A question-and-answer period
- Contact information for future questions

Recovery

Restoring Stability

Recovery is the ongoing process of restoring the social and emotional equilibrium of the school community by promoting positive coping skills and resilience in students and adults. The rate of recovery will vary from person to person, depending upon factors such as age, gender, degree of direct exposure to violence, death or injury of a friend or family member, previous traumatic life experiences, and pre-existing history of anxiety and depression.

The good news is that most students and staff do recover with the support and assistance of caring educators and mental health professionals. The process of recovery is aided when students and staff can anticipate the stages of recovery and prepare for the normal changes in behavior, thinking, emotion, and spirit that occur over time.

Maintaining Routines

In all phases of recovery, schools provide the greatest degree of support when their routines and social activities are maintained. The routine and activities provide natural places where experiences can be shared and preserves the sense of belonging and solidarity so crucial to students and staff after a crisis.

Using Community Support

Community groups can contribute to school based recovery programs by supporting students who are motivated to find long-term community solutions to the current and pre-existing problems of community violence. The involvement of law enforcement, emergency service personnel, faith-based organizations, community service organizations, and others during the long-term phase of recovery helps to rebuild a safer community that will promote individual well-being.

Consensus Recommendations

Given that the number of violent incidents on or near school campuses has been increasing in recent years, expert consensus in the field offers the following recommendations:

- Trauma recovery services should be available to students, staff, and families after a school-related violent event
- Teachers, while serving a crucial, front line role, should not be required to provide treatment
- Community agencies should work in partnership with school administrators and staff
- Mental health services should be available for those in need through all phases of recovery
- All stakeholders should be involved in planning for and responding to a school-related violent event

Source URL (retrieved on 02/22/2017 - 11:02):

<http://nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/the-3r-school-crises-and-disasters>

Links:

[1]

http://nctsn.org/sites/all/modules/pubdCnt/pubdCnt.php?file=/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Challenger_Newsletter_Checklist-final_sw_rvsd.pdf&nid=184

[2]

http://nctsn.org/sites/all/modules/pubdCnt/pubdCnt.php?file=/sites/default/files/assets/word_docs/3SampleLettertoDevelopSchoolPartnership.doc&nid=184

[3] <http://nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/crisis-situation>

[4] <http://nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters/psychological-first-aid>