

Providing Psychological First Aid: Teachers

During an emergency, your primary responsibility is the safety and welfare of you and your students. When classes resume, you may feel the need to return to academics quickly. However, to best promote long-term recovery and to help students return to their pre-crisis ability to concentrate and function academically, be sure to talk to them about the recovery process and address any safety concerns. You may want to modify the classroom curriculum temporarily, take extra time to cover certain material, or postpone possibly distressing subject matter. Below are suggestions on how to implement PFA-S.

PFA-S Core Action 1: Contact and Engagement

Take the Initiative: Students may withdraw or have other difficulties recovering from the crisis and fail to seek help. Actively reach out to students, especially those you have a good relationship with. If they aren't willing to talk with you, seek out another staff member who may be able to help. Speak in private if you can and be discreet.

Seek Consultation: It is impossible to prepare for every scenario that may occur or every concern students may have. Consult the school's mental health professional or have him/her visit your class to give information and answer students' questions.

PFA-S Core Action 2: Safety and Comfort

Reassure Students: In the days and weeks after the incident, students may continue to show signs of emotional distress or concern. Reassure them that they can come to you with such concerns and/or inform them of the procedures in place to get help.

Report Safety Concerns: Be alert to safety concerns about subsequent incidents or rumors, and report any such rumors or threats immediately to the school's Safety Officer or administration.

Help Manage Grief: If a student is struggling with the death of a friend or loved one, provide appropriate emotional support. After identifying the needs of the student, notify the school's mental health professional of the situation and modify academic assignments as needed.

Provide Information about the Event: Consider these guidelines when talking with students:

- ✓ Be truthful and share information in a developmentally appropriate way.
- ✓ Discourage discussion about details of any death or disturbing aspects of the event.
- ✓ Provide a timeline of upcoming school activities (clearing of debris, removal of memorial displays, rebuilding efforts).
- ✓ Work with the students in planning memorial tributes or displays. Inform them about any applicable school procedures or restrictions.
- ✓ Encourage students to participate in prosocial service activities (volunteer days, fund raising events). Help students assemble cards, letters, and memory books for the families of the victims, but ensure that the content of such materials is appropriate.

PFA-S Core Action 3: Stabilization

Stabilize the School Environment: Calmly convey to your students that the staff and administration are continuing to monitor the situation and will attempt to address any concerns they might have. Students are often anxious when facing trauma-related chaos, changes, and transitions. Providing them with a calm, supportive environment with clear rules and expectations will help them regain a sense of security and normalcy.

Identify Possible Reminders: Take steps, to the extent possible, to eliminate potential reminders in your classroom that may cause distress (e.g., substitute potentially distressing lesson plans, remove hanging pictures of the crisis on the walls). If a student does become reactive, calmly provide emotional support or refer him/her to the school's health/mental health professional.

PFA-S Core Action 4: Information Gathering

Know Common Signs of Distress: Watch and listen for any students who show signs of distress or changes in behavior and refer them to the appropriate professionals. Signs of distress vary by age and developmental level and can include:

- Poor control of emotions
- Anger and moodiness
- Frustration and anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Change in academic performance or in attendance
- Trouble with concentration, memory, cognition, and organization
- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomachs
- Risk-taking, unpredictable, and/or impulsive behavior
- Intense reactions to reminders of the event

Identify Students Needing Services: If you see changes in a student, ask directly how he/she is doing. Many students will not tell someone they are having difficulty until they are directly asked. Also ask the student if he/she knows of any classmates who may need help. They are often aware of changes in their peers.

PFA-S Core Action 5: Practical Assistance

Identify Students with Resource Needs: Help to identify students' needs, such as school supplies, tutoring, or uniforms. If a student has transferred from another school system, find out if they have an IEP, whether there are accommodations to meet personalized plans, or other academic needs.

Help Families: You may be able to help students' families with their needs and concerns by directing them to appropriate support staff and resources. Reassure them of the steps the school is taking to promote recovery. Use a part of staff meetings to discuss some of these needs and concerns so that administration can problem-solve ways how to address them (e.g., identify additional community resources, use of donation funds).

PFA-S Core Action 6: Connection with Social Supports

Integrate New Students: Students from other schools may transfer to your school temporarily or permanently. Attempt to integrate new students into your class as soon as possible. Introduce them to other students with similar interests (sports, arts, clubs) or from similar neighborhoods. Avoid singling out these students in a way that could alienate them from the rest of the student body. Be aware that they will be missing their old friends and strategize ways to reconnect them if possible.

Increase In-Class Interaction: You will want to encourage interaction among students to facilitate social support. Increase the number of group activities and collaborative assignments. Encourage reconnection with family, friends, and members of their faith communities. Provide information about upcoming community events and give details about these events with added precautions. Thus, give details about events and add precautions if you are concerned that some students may not be ready for some events (e.g., memorials).

PFA-S Core Action 7: Information on Coping

Address Concerns: Schedule time with students to listen to their concerns about the incident. Correct misconceptions they may have about recovery. Schedule this discussion early in the day and when there is enough time to address all concerns.

Maintain Structure: Help students' recovery by keeping to the regular classroom structure as best you can. Students benefit from predictability and consistency. When children need to change teachers and/or classrooms, make the new setting as similar as possible to the previous one. If this is not possible, discuss the losses and changes as a group.

Provide Support: Students may exhibit more defiant, hyperactive, and/or distractive behaviors in your classroom. Remain calm and provide clear instructions of the behavior you expect. Praise students for appropriate, on-task behavior and for using effective coping skills. To assist students to be more organized, breakdown assignments into manageable parts and encourage them to write them in their planners.

PFA-S Core Action 8: Link with Collaborative Services

Provide Information on Available Services: All families, students, and staff need to know the location of school and community services and the steps required to access these services. If you are unsure of the appropriate and available resources, refer the individual in need to support staff who have that information. Have psychoeducational and informational materials available for parents in order to address their questions.

Follow up on Recommendations: Check in with students and parents to make sure that they are getting the services or resources you have recommended. If not, review the plan and adjust it accordingly.

In the days and weeks following an emergency, the school often becomes a recovery milieu. You play a vital role in the recovery of the students and the school community. You serve as the primary contact person for students throughout the course of the day by watching out for the welfare of students, identifying those who are struggling and getting them help, and providing updated and accurate information which you obtain through staff meetings and from the school administration. By utilizing the suggestions in this handout, you can help students recover and succeed academically, psychologically, and socially. These strategies can also help you and your family. Most importantly, don't forget to take care of yourself during these stressful times.