

Psychological First Aid (PFA) For Students and Teachers

Helping you help your students in times of disaster, school crises, or emergencies.

As a teacher, you are in an excellent position to help your students after a disaster, school crisis, or emergency.

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 such an event.

You can help your students if you:

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT— MODEL & TEACH

The steps of PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID for your students after a disaster, school crisis, or emergency. These steps can help them bounce back more quickly.

Getting Started: Understanding the Effect of a Disaster, School Crisis, or Emergency

THINK ABOUT your students' "DIRECT EXPERIENCE" with the event.

"Direct Experience" means *First-hand experience* of the event. After the event, changes can happen in students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Your students may worry about family members, classmates, friends or pets they care about, and may worry that it will happen again.

Common reactions to disasters, school crises and emergencies include trouble sleeping, problems at school and with friends, trouble concentrating and listening, and not finishing work or assignments. Your students may become more irritable, sad, angry, or worried as they think about what has happened, and as they experience recovery efforts after the event. When students share their experiences, thoughts and feelings about the event, LISTEN for RISK FACTORS for adverse reactions. Risk factors that may indicate a counseling referral is needed for students include:

- loss of a family member, schoolmate, friend or pet
- observing serious injury or the death of another person
- family members or friends missing after the event
- getting hurt or becoming sick due to the event
- home loss, family moves, changes in neighborhoods, changes in schools, and/or loss of belongings
- being unable to evacuate quickly
- past traumatic experiences or losses

If a student has had any of these experiences, you may wish to consider referring her or him to your school psychologist, counselor, or social worker.

Now that you know what can affect your students after a disaster, school crisis, or emergency, you're ready to

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT— MODEL & TEACH!



1. LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT—MODEL & TEACH

The first important step to help your students after an event is to listen and pay attention to what they say and how they act. Remember that your students may also show their feelings in nonverbal ways, like increased behavioral problems or increased withdrawal. **Let your students know** you are willing to listen and talk about the event, or to make referrals to talk to an appropriate professional, if they prefer it. Use the following questions to talk with your students.

You can listen for clues that indicate when students are having a hard time. Write down a few examples that may be helpful to note:

1. What might be preventing a student from coming to or staying in school?
2. What might be preventing a student from paying attention in class or doing homework?
3. What might be preventing a student from returning to other school-based activities?

Listen, observe, and note any changes in: behavior and/or mood; school performance; interactions with schoolmates and teachers; participation in school-based activities; and behaviors at home that parents discuss with you.

LISTEN, 2. PROTECT, CONNECT— MODEL & TEACH

You can **help make your students feel better** by doing some or all of the following:

- Answer questions simply and honestly, clearing up confusion students may have about what happened.
- **Let your students know that they are not alone in their reaction to the event.**
- Provide opportunities for your students to talk, draw, and play, but don't force it.
- **Talk to your students about what is being done by the school and community to keep everyone safe from harm.**
- Watch for anything in the environment that could re-traumatize your students.
- **Keep your eyes and ears open for bullying behaviors.**
- Maintain daily routines, activities, and structure with clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback, limit unnecessary changes.
- **Make adjustments to assignments to be sensitive to students' current level of functioning.**
- Limit access to live television and the internet that show disturbing scenes of the event.
- **Encourage student to "take a break" from the crisis focus with activities unrelated to the event.**
- Find ways for your students to feel helpful to your classroom, the school, and the community.



LISTEN, PROTECT, 3. CONNECT— MODEL & TEACH

Reaching out to people in your school and community will help your students after a disaster, school crisis, or emergency. These connections will build strength for everyone. Consider ways to make some or all of the following connections:

- "Check in" with students on a regular basis.
- **Find resources that can offer support to your students and classroom.**
- Keep communication open with others involved in your students' lives (parents, other teachers, coaches, etc.).
- **Restore interactive school activities including sports, club meetings, student-serviced projects, and a student government.**
- Encourage student activities with friends, including class projects and extracurricular activities.
- **Empathize with your students by allowing a little more time for them to learn new materials.**
- Build on your students' strengths. Find ways to help them use what they have learned in the past to help them deal with the event.
- **Remind your students those major disasters, crises, and emergencies are rare, and discuss other times they have felt safe.**

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT— 4. MODEL & TEACH

As you help your students after a disaster, crisis, or emergency, your **efforts may be more successful**—and you may be less stressed—if you **keep in mind:**

- It is good to be aware of your thoughts, feelings, and reactions about the event, which can be seen and can affect your students.
- **How you cope and behave after an event will influence how your students cope and behave. Your students will be watching you for both verbal and nonverbal cues.**
- Monitor conversations that students may hear.
- **Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation but demonstrate how people can come together to cope after such an event.**

LISTEN, PROTECT, CONNECT— MODEL & 5. TEACH

Talk to your students about **expected reactions after a crisis** (emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and physiological). There are "normal" reactions to abnormal events

- Different people may have very different reactions, even within the same family. After the event, people may also have different amounts of time they need to cope and adjust.
- **Encourage your students to identify and use positive coping strategies to help them after the event.**
- Help your student's problem-solve to get through each day successfully.
- **Help your students set small "doable" goals and share in these achievements as "wins" for the students and your classroom.**
- Remind students that with time and assistance, things generally get better. If they don't, they should let a parent or teach know.