

Providing Psychological First Aid: Health-Related Professionals

You play a unique role in caring for the needs of the school community during and after times of crisis. The acute phase is not the time to provide therapy. It is the time for immediate assistance to those affected by the emergency. If you are called to a situation that is beyond your usual scope of practice, do not hesitate to consult providers more experienced in this type of event. If you are from an outside agency responding to a school crisis, you may be more helpful by assisting staff and parents than providing direct care to those most impacted, freeing the school health and mental health staff to provide the direct support needed after such events.

PFA-S Core Action 1: Contact and Engagement

Be Aware of Cultural and Developmental Issues: Before working directly with students and staff, learn about the school culture and the cultural and developmental issues of the survivors to whom you will be providing services. Modify contact based on these factors.

Reach out to Those Affected: Outreach to students and staff, even though they may avoid asking for or seeking help. If you are new to the school, work with teachers or other staff who are more familiar with the school community. At a minimum, talk to school officials about the individuals who were most impacted in the emergency, and find out if there are prior events or situations that may put this group at increased risk for distress.

Work as a Team: Always work within the Incident Command System and within a team, so that you can utilize each member's unique skill sets. Communicate frequently with your team to learn about changing needs and concerns.

Plan for Students' Ongoing Needs: Students with the greatest exposure and those who have experienced a death will need continuing support at school. Make sure a school staff member is assigned to support these individuals, rather than a provider from the community who may not be able to assist the students' long-term needs.

PFA-S Core Action 2: Safety and Comfort

Ensure Safety: Ask staff and students if they have any current safety concerns at school. Listen for rumors or threats of subsequent incidents, and report any such rumors or threats immediately to the school's Safety Officer or administration.

Watch for High-Risk Behavior: Students may increase substance use or participate in other high-risk behaviors (e.g., driving recklessly, initiating fights), endangering themselves or others. Students are the first to know if a peer is troubled, so ask them directly if they are concerned about anyone's safety. Address these concerns immediately. Seek additional assistance if needed (e.g., school resource officer, threat assessment team).

Support Those Overwhelmed with Grief: Support and comfort those overwhelmed with the death of a friend or family member. You might work with teachers on how to talk to their class about the death of a student or staff member, help administration with memorial events and displays, and/or assess at-risk students.

PFA-S Core Action 3: Stabilization

Identify Vulnerable Students and Staff: Those with a history of prior mental health problems or who have had similar past traumas may have more difficulty in the current crisis. Be sure to ask about prior experiences and coping strategies. Check in with these individuals frequently, particularly if there are continuing safety concerns at the school. Be aware that they may have distressing reactions to reminders of former traumatic events or may become unstable, more so than the rest of the school population. Offer to guide them in relaxation and grounding techniques, and check back with them to assess how they are doing.

Differentiate between Physical and Emotional Distress: Some students and staff members may present with physical reactions and may have frequent visits to the nurse or a medical doctor. Ask about their experience during the crisis and how they are coping. Find out if the physical reactions are related to the recent trauma (e.g., Did the symptoms start around the time of the event? Do they become more severe when the person is reminded of the event?), and consider a referral to a mental health specialist.

PFA-S Core Action 4: Information Gathering

Know All You Can about the Incident: Find out what happened during the event and who was affected. When “mapping” the event, learn which individuals may have been more impacted than others. Obtain information from interviews, attendance records, nursing and/or teacher reports, police reports, and crisis team debriefing meetings.

Develop a Referral System: Educate staff members as to how they can refer students for evaluation or services. Provide staff psychoeducation on common risk factors and developmentally-specific signs that a student is at risk. Routinely ask teachers about how their students are behaving in the classroom and whether they have any concerns.

Proactively Screen/Assess Students and Staff: Use standardized measures to screen students and staff in terms of their experiences during the event in order to identify those in distress. Systematic screening is the most effective way to identify those who are at risk or who need additional services.

PFA-S Core Action 5: Practical Assistance

Don’t Underestimate the Importance of Practical Assistance: Assisting with practical needs is a protective factor that enhances recovery. You are in a key position to identify the needs of students and staff and to identify barriers to obtaining resources. Link staff and students to support staff or to an agency contact who can provide these services.

Coordinate Needs: Work with your team leader to ensure that requests for supplies (food, water, toys) are relayed up the chain of command. Also work with families to help with such things as transportation, recouping costs from recovery, and so forth. While some of these activities may be beyond your typical job responsibilities, coordinating practical needs is essential and may require you to expand your role.

PFA-S Core Action 6: Connection with Social Supports

Establish Social Connectedness Programs: Develop venues to increase interaction among students and staff. You might facilitate group discussions on various health- or mental health-related topics pertinent to the crisis, or you might help publicize upcoming, supportive community events. Encourage individuals to reconnect with their family members, friends, and members of their faith community or other social or community organization. For students, make recommendations specific to extramural student group activities or facilitate a peer-to-peer program that may provide a venue for social support.

Integrate New Students: Students may transfer to other schools temporarily or permanently. Attempt to integrate these students into the school culture and orient them to the school procedures as quickly as possible. Avoid singling out these students in ways that might alienate them from the rest of the student body. For example, too much attention from faculty and staff may result in peers distancing themselves from the new students. Do try to connect these students with former friends or classmates, as connectedness is an important protective factor.

PFA-S Core Action 7: Information on Coping

Meet with Parents: Attend the parents' meetings and provide information about common reactions, address safety concerns, and discuss available resources. Be prepared for these meetings to be stressful, as parents will be anxious and may have significant safety concerns. Parents, like students and staff, cope best when provided with support. School-sponsored meetings can provide parents with the opportunity to build their own social support network. Always conduct these meetings in partnership with the administration and law enforcement.

No One Way to Recover: You will often get questions about the natural course of recovery. Emphasize that there is no one "right" way to recover and that different people will recover at different points in time. Most importantly, emphasize that everyone should respect individual differences. To this end, teach students and staff about typical reactions after emergencies, trauma/loss reminders, reestablish schedules and routines, and effective coping strategies.

PFA-S Core Action 8: Link with Collaborative Services

Provide Information on Available Services: Inform families, students, and staff about the location of mental health and other services and the steps required to access them. You may have to broaden your list of community services to fully address the students' and staff members' current needs.

Update the Referral List to Include Trauma and Loss-Informed Services: Do the research to make sure that the providers on the referral list have experience in the type of event that occurred. If you have or are given a standard referral list, review it in light of the situation, and do your best to add the names of professionals who can offer more specialized, developmentally appropriate, and trauma/loss-informed services.

Facilitate Access to Services: To ensure that students and staff are connected with relevant services, help make the calls, double-check that the agency is accepting referrals, and address any concerns students or staff members might have about the services.

In the days and weeks following an emergency, the school becomes a recovery milieu. Health-related professionals play an important role in monitoring the course of recovery of the students and staff. By actively outreaching to the school community, creating a referral system, and providing state-of-the-art services and programs, health-related professionals can help the school stabilize and accelerate recovery. Secondary traumatic stress is common for those in the helping professions and in leadership roles. As you create an environment to promote recovery in those around you, be sure to practice your own self-care.