Helping students and staff cope with crisis and loss during a pandemic

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Outline

• LAUSD five resilience factors
• Helping children cope with the pandemic
• Supporting grieving students during the pandemic
• Professional self-care
LAUSD Five Resilience Factors

Sense of Safety:
• Establish a sense of safety
• Create or re-establish routines
• Encourage self-expression
• Maintain a sensitive and caring environment
• Provide and seek comfort, stability and predictability

Ability to Calm:
• Be aware of your reaction
• Model calmness and coping
LAUSD Five Resilience Factors continued

Self-Efficacy and Community-Efficacy

Connectedness
• Cultivate and maintain healthy connection
• Listen and be present
• Minimize exposure to media outlets
• Provide facts and Stay informed and updated

Hope
• Empower children to express themselves and to play a role in their own safety
• Maintain calm and express optimism for the future
Effects of the World Trade Center Attack on NYC Public School Students

• 6 months after 9-11-01
• Applied Research and Consulting, LLC, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and NY State Psychiatric Institute
• Over 8,000 students grades 4-12
• Self-reports of current mental health problems and impairment in functioning
• “Probable psychiatric disorder” if reported symptoms consistent with diagnostic criteria AND impairment in functioning
Prevalence of probable psychiatric disorders

• One of four met criteria for one or more of probable psychiatric disorders
• Approximately one out of ten had: PTSD (11%), major depressive disorder (8%), separation anxiety disorder (12%), and panic attacks (9%)
• 15% had agoraphobia
Adjustment problems nearly universal

- 87% reported PTSD symptom 6 months later
  - 76% often thinking about attack
  - 45% trying to avoid thinking, hearing, or talking about it
  - 25% harder to keep mind on things
  - 24% problems sleeping
  - 17% nightmares
  - 18% stopped going to places or doing things that reminded them
- 11% at least 6 symptoms → probable PTSD
  2/3 had not sought any mental health services
If only the signs were this easy to read.
Talking with and supporting children

• Don’t pretend everything is OK – children pick up when parents/adults are not genuine and honest
• Children may pick up on concerns primarily of adults
• Provide appropriate reassurance, but don’t give false reassurance
• Find out individual child’s fears, concerns, skepticism
• Don’t tell children that they shouldn’t be worried; help them learn to deal with their uncertainty and fear
• Include positive information; present a hopeful perspective
Strategies for dealing with distress

• Reading or hobbies that promote healthy distraction
• Journaling, blogging, art, music to promote expressions of feelings
• Exercise, yoga
• Appropriate use of respectful humor
• Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, self-hypnosis and guided imagery
• Cognitive behavioral therapy

Help children identify steps they can take personally to protect their own health and to help others
Some children may need more assistance

• The pandemic and discussion about the impact on families may remind children of other difficulties – events in the past, ongoing challenges, or concerns about future losses or crises

• Children who were anxious or depressed before the pandemic will likely need more support

• Children may need to focus first on their own needs before they are able to think of needs of others; try not to make them feel guilty for thinking about how this crisis impacts them personally
Watch your media consumption

• Make sure it is a healthy diet; don’t consume too much
• Keep informed through focused/periodic attention to trusted sources of information
• If you aren’t getting reassured or learning practical actions to take, then disconnect from media
• Limit amount of media exposure – this is a good time to unplug and connect instead with children and family
Grief during a pandemic

• After a death, children often concerned about the health of themselves or others close to them
  – Important to help children deal with fears/concerns about the pandemic

• Social distancing measures including school closure increase social isolation and makes it difficult to provide support

• Secondary losses become even more of an issue

• Family members may be overwhelmed by the pandemic as well as their own grief
Grief during a pandemic (continued)

• Children may experience more than one personal loss; deaths may impact the entire school community
• Some grief may not be related to death
• Grieving students often experience at least temporary academic difficulties; so do children during a crisis
• Supporting grieving students can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times
• This is an unprecedented time, but there are practical steps school professionals can still take to support grieving students
What you are doing is of value

• Just because we don’t know everything, doesn’t mean we know nothing of value
• You know strategies that have helped in the past to decrease distress – try them now
• Reach out to colleagues/resources in school district and community when more is critically needed
• Celebrate positive contributions you make
• Set reasonable expectations
• The curriculum has changed – teaching children how to cope → helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient
Compassion fatigue

• Exposure to trauma and suffering of others can lead to compassion fatigue
  – Empathy: understanding and taking perspective of another
  – Compassion: requires empathy but includes wanting to help and/or desiring to relieve suffering – “to bear or suffer together”

• Warnings about compassion fatigue imply that compassion is necessarily tiring

• Compassionate approaches can be gratifying and bring meaning to the work
Supporting those in need can be gratifying

- Realistic objectives of purpose of interactions
- Have skills and resources to provide meaningful assistance
- Are aware of and have sufficient support to deal with personal impact of work
- Especially difficult during a pandemic when you have other challenges
Challenges to self-care

• Making time when there is so much to do and everyone needs your help
• Feeling shame or guilt for attending to your own needs
• Assuming others are having less trouble adjusting
• Lack of modeling of professional self-care
Challenges for leadership after a crisis

- No matter what you do, or how well you do it, you won’t be able to make everything ok
- Those impacted by a crisis often react to feeling out of control by trying to exert more control
- People will have very different views about what should be done and feel strongly about those views
  - Safety
  - Timeline for returning to academic focus
  - Commemoration and memorialization
  - Use of funds
- Reactions can challenge working relationships
- You can’t stop and focus just on recovery
THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL CRISIS AND BEREAVEMENT

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National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
www.grievingstudents.org

Order Free Materials (download)

After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)
Supporting Organizational Members