



PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA)

General Guidelines for Addressing Mental Health Needs in the School Environment

PFA is an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, disaster, or terrorism. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short and long-term adaptive functioning.

Mass Shooting Response and Recovery for Staff

After a mass shooting, most students and families will recover over time. The length of the recovery process depends on a variety of factors, including the students' proximity to the event, how well families cope with stressors, as well as the amount of support and resources available through the family, school, and community. As school personnel, we each play a critical role in promoting a sense of safety and enhancing protective factors for students; for example, modeling calm and healthy relationships, teaching students techniques and skills to be able to be calm, promoting self and community efficacy, as well as ensuring students are linked and connected to resources. There are strategies you can implement on a daily basis to ensure students are heard and feel protected during these difficult times.

LISTEN to what they say and how they act.

- Pay attention to feelings and behaviors and make yourself available, as soon as possible.
- If a student wants to talk, be prepared to listen and focus on what s/he says and how you can be of help. Let them know that it is okay to ask questions and to share their worries, and that their reactions to the mass shooting are normal.
- Students will react differently to a mass shooting and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, personal experience with the shooting, and prior experiences. Some reactions may include difficulty regulating emotions, irritability, increased behavioral problems, as well as fear and worry about their safety and the safety of others.
- Engage in open dialogue with students. For example:
 - *How are you?*
 - *If you would like to talk about what happened, I'm here to listen.*
 - *How is this event affecting you? What are you feeling? Thinking?*
 - *How can we help you to feel safe?*



PROTECT by maintaining structure, stability, and consistency.

- Provide concrete information to students about their school's safety/security procedures and reassure them that they are safe. You may need to repeat this frequently to students or ask open ended questions about what their concerns about safety maybe
- Maintain daily routines, activities, and structure with clear expectations and consistent roles. Depending on the impact of the event, school shooting or community incident affecting the school, educators may want to consider shorter lessons, going at a slower pace, and giving less homework than usual for a short time, physical exercise or mindfulness activities.
- Monitor conversations that students may engage in or hear and observe their playtime, recess, or lunch periods for evidence of additional protective factors.
- Give information that is accurate and age-appropriate.
- Keep the environment free of anything that could re-traumatize the student. Monitor technology use (cell phones, tablets, computers) to limit media exposure about the mass shooting.
- Validate the student's feelings and experiences with mass shootings.
- Maintain confidentiality as appropriate.
- Ask open-ended questions, such as:
 - *What will help you feel safe?*
 - *What are your thoughts/feelings about the mass shooting?*



CONNECT through interaction, activities, and resources.



- “Check-in” with student(s) on a regular basis.
- It is not uncommon for students of all ages to experience stress reactions when exposed (even through media) to shootings or mass violence. Identify students who may be at higher risk for distress; this may include changes in eating, sleeping habits, energy levels, and mood. Encourage distressed students to meet with school support staff, an administrator, and/or a mental health professional.
- Encourage conversations, interactions, activities, and team projects with friends and teachers that are unrelated to the mass shooting. Increased exposure to recent events can add more distress and worry in students.
- Keep communication open with others involved in the student(s) lives (e.g. parents, other teachers, coaches, etc.).
- Determine which agencies or district supports are available for individual and family counseling. Mental health support may also be needed, contact SMH school staff, local district staff or central staff for consultation as needed.

MODEL calm and optimistic behavior.



- Model healthy responses by remaining calm, courteous, organized, and helpful. Your ability to cope during and after a violent incident, school shooting or community event can influence your student(s) recovery.
- Monitor conversations you and your colleagues have about the mass shooting; students are watching and listening to what adults are doing and saying during and after crisis incidents. If students overhear adult conversations, any negative perceptions, feelings, and memories may inadvertently make students feel more anxious.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and incident, but demonstrate how people can come together to cope after such an event.
- Introduce calming activities throughout the day, such as:
 - Taking deep breaths
 - Walking quietly and counting steps
 - Listening to relaxing music
 - Taking stretch breaks
- Practice self-care so that you can be at your best to support students by sleeping well, eating well, and spending time with loved ones.

TEACH about normal changes that can occur when traumatized.



- Validate that students may have different reactions even to the same event.
- Encourage students to identify and use positive coping strategies (e.g., deep breathing, drawing, journaling). Teach students that experiencing a range of thoughts, feelings and emotions is to be expected; and that there are healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with them. Help students identify healthy ways of coping with feelings, such as listening to music, exercising, talking or writing, etc. Also, students cope better and recover sooner when they help others.
- **Note:** *With time and support, students generally do better. If you have any concerns about a student's safety or ability to cope, consult with your school site administrator, school support staff, and/or a mental health professional.*