Helping Students Cope with Traumatic Events—Tips for Educators

From the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD)

When violent acts occur in the midst of normal, everyday events—as happened recently in Boston—people are left with a feeling a heightened state of alert, stress and anxiety. Children and youth are likely to feel vulnerable when these situations occur, and it is the responsibility of adults to help them feel safe and secure. CEC and CCBD offer the following tips for educators to help their students learn how to cope with their emotions.

Assess students’ needs. Talk to colleagues. Share your ideas and concerns. This will help you manage your own anxieties as well as determine the needs of the general student body and individual students. Also take cues from what your students do and say. Know who has family who has experienced trauma or another risk factor. Encourage families to share with teachers, including if they have a family member on active duty in the military.

Recognize reactions to trauma. Most students will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and teachers. However, some students may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms differ depending on age, and adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following behaviors over an extended period of time:

- **Preschoolers** -- thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary School Children** -- irritability, aggressiveness, clingingness, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents** -- sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increased conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration.

Identify vulnerable populations. The degree to which students are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Students may be more vulnerable if they:

- Live in proximity to past traumatic events or high-target areas.
- Live in neighborhoods with higher rates of violent incidents.
- Have suffered a personal loss from or been exposed to violence or military actions.
- Have parents in the military who have fought in past or ongoing conflicts or who are on active duty in the reserve forces.
- Have parents involved in emergency response or public safety.
- Feel threatened by intolerance or racism.
- Experience posttraumatic stress disorder, depression or other mental illness.

Create a positive school environment and culture. The best thing schools can do to help students feel safe is to create an environment and culture that is positive and welcoming. Establishing a caring climate and maintaining that through trauma and crisis invites students to share their thoughts, feelings and emotions, which helps them to get through difficult situations.

Remain calm and reassuring. Students will take their cues from you, especially young children. Acknowledge that the threats and uncertainty are unnerving, but the likelihood is that you and your students will be okay. There is a difference between the possibility of danger and the probability of it affecting them personally. Seek the help of your school psychologist or counselor if you are unsure of what to say.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow students to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage any questions they may have regarding this event. Being an empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that others are feeling the same way and that their reactions are normal and expected. Set aside time to discuss the topic and then stick to the normal routine of the school day as best you can.

Take care of your own needs. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your students if you are coping well. If you are anxious or upset, your students are more likely to be so as well. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, or a counselor. It is important not to dwell on your fears by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes us feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy.

Discuss events in age-appropriate terms. Share information that is appropriate to their age and developmental level. Update them as information changes. Young children may require repeated reassurance during the day. Tell them they are okay and that adults will always take care of them. School age children can understand details and reasons behind specific actions, such as increased security but cannot absorb intense or frightening information. Adolescents may want to discuss issues related to violence, terrorism or war as well as safety issues.

Help students explore and express their opinions respectfully. Explain that opinion is not the same as fact. Fact is what actually happens. Opinions are how we feel about what happens. Everyone has a right to their opinion and discussing different views can deepen a student’s understanding of the world. Addressing the intolerance that leads to conflict and aggression can also help students regain a sense of control.

Resources
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry http://aacap.org
- American School Counselors Association, www.schoolcounselor.org
- American Psychological Association www.apa.org
- National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org
(These tips were adapted from a document created by The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), Helping Children Cope with Terrorism, 2013; http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/Helping_Children_Cope_With_Terrorism_2013.pdf).