

Action Guide to Protect Mental Health in Schools During Disasters

**FOR
SCHOOL
PERSONNEL**

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PHASES PSYCHOSOCIAL PHASES OF DISASTERS	RECOMMENDED ACTIONS
PREPAREDNESS THREAT OR WARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in as much training as possible. Request that your school conduct regular disaster drills. • Become acquainted with all aspects of your school’s disaster plan. Read it, become familiar with it, train to it, practice it, and revise it. • Know your role in an emergency and the roles of your school’s crisis team members. • Review and update the mental health section of your school’s all-hazards plan. Organize a professional/school network of support. Include nurses and counselors from other districts as surge. • Identify needed resources, especially those needed to have on-hand in case of a school or classroom lockdown. Include “comfort” items such as crayons, puzzles, and arts and crafts supplies. • Develop a communication plan. Know how you would communicate with teachers, administrators, parents, and media.
RESPONSE IMPACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate your school’s disaster plan. • Obtain facts regarding the crisis and, with permission from the principal and/or other authority, accurately and honestly explain what has happened to students and anyone else involved. • Watch for signs of distress in students and colleagues. (See attached supplement for a list.) Reactions can range from stunned or shock-like to panic and hysteria; but typically, response is confusion and disbelief.
RESPONSE RECOVERY AND HEROIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that this phase occurs during disaster impact and immediately following - and lasts as long as people are being rescued. • Contact your school or municipal incident command post to see where you may be needed. During this phase, survival, rescuing others, and promoting safety are the priorities. • Be on alert as a member of your school’s crisis/emergency team and assess where and how you can provide support and stress mitigation. • Model appropriate expression of feelings when in the presence of students and let them know that they have permission to verbalize what they are experiencing.
RECOVERY HONEYMOON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that this phase may last from 1 week to 2 months and is characterized by a strong sense of camaraderie as people bond together to help. • Help people learn to help themselves. There may be several agencies available to support the school, teachers, and students during this time, but an effort should be made to prepare for the day when that support is no longer available. Resiliency is the key, so get all individuals working to help themselves.
RECOVERY DISILLUSIONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that this phase may last from 2 months to 2 years and is characterized by strong feelings of anger, loss, resentment, and bitterness. • Watch for signs of distress in students. • Explain to students that they may experience waves of strong emotions and they should not feel that they are “abnormal” or “going crazy.” • Coach students on how to effectively deal with strong emotions, (i.e., talking to others, listening to music, exercising, working with others on projects, assisting people that need additional help such as baby sitting children). • Create opportunities for students to discuss their feelings and reactions at school. • Allow students to express their feelings through other modes of communication, (i.e., for younger children, encourage writing and drawing).
MITIGATION RECONSTRUCTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to assess what victims and survivors will need to continue functioning, and how to help them deal with stress. The goal is to help them get back to their pre-disaster level of functioning. • Continue to look for signs of distress and inability to cope. If people have poor coping skills and no help, they may continue to have an increase in anxiety, fear, and anger. • Listen and reassure those who are struggling with the aftermath. Help them understand what happened and what resources are available to them. In some cases, an individual may need some extra support from a member of the clergy or a mental health agency. • Reduce anxiety with education and reassurance. • Encourage survivors and victims to use natural support systems (i.e., family, peers, etc.). • Refer persons who are obviously beyond crisis management, are in need of grief counseling, or abuse themselves or others. • Inventory and restock needed resources, especially those used during lockdown.

This information is provided as a reference guide for schools. It is not intended to replace professional training and/or school policies and procedures.

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SIGNS OF DISTRESS TO WATCH FOR AFTER A DISASTER

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Preschool Ages 1-5

- thumb sucking
- speech difficulties
- bed wetting
- decreases or increases in appetite
- fear of the dark
- clinging and whining
- loss of bladder control
- separation difficulties

Elementary School Ages 5-11

- sadness & crying
- school avoidance
- physical complaints (e.g., headaches)
- poor concentration
- irritability
- fear of personal harm
- regressive behavior (e.g., clinging, whining)
- nightmares
- aggressive behavior at home or school
- bed wetting
- anxiety & fears
- confusion
- eating difficulty
- withdrawal/social isolation
- attention-seeking behavior

Middle School Ages 11-14

- sleep disturbance
- withdrawal/isolation from peers
- increase or decrease in appetite
- loss of interest in activities
- rebelliousness
- generalized anxiety
- school difficulty, including fighting
- fear of personal harm
- physical ailments (e.g., bowel problems)
- poor school performance
- depression
- concentration difficulties

High School Ages 15-18 Adolescence (Ages 14-18)

- numbing
- intrusive recollections
- sleep disturbance
- anxiety and feelings of guilt
- eating disturbance
- poor concentration and distractibility
- psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headaches)
- antisocial behavior (e.g., stealing)
- apathy
- aggressive behavior
- agitation or decrease in energy level
- poor school performance
- depression
- peer problems
- withdrawal
- increased substance abuse
- decreased interest in dating

Adulthood

- denial
- feelings of detachment
- unwanted, intrusive recollections
- depression
- concentration difficulty
- anxiety
- psychosomatic complaints
- hypervigilance
- withdrawal
- eating disturbance
- irritability and low frustration tolerance
- sleep difficulty
- poor work performance
- loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- emotional and mental fatigue
- emotional lability
- marital/relationship discord

