

Supporting Children's Mental Health Needs in the Aftermath of a Disaster: Pediatric Pearls

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Outline of Presentation

- How to support children after a disaster
- Symptoms of adjustment reactions
- Which children are likely to benefit from additional mental health services beyond psychological first aid

Psychological First Aid

- Provide broadly to those impacted
- Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
- All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope



Psychological First Aid

- Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support
 - If unprepared, they can be a source of further distress

PFA Actions

- Observation or awareness
- Make a connection
- Help people feel comfortable and at ease
- Be kind, calm, and compassionate
- Assist with basic needs
- Listen

PFA Actions

- Give realistic reassurance
- Encourage good coping
- Help people connect
- Give accurate and timely information
- Suggest a referral resource
- End the conversation

– Source: American Red Cross

Basic Needs Are Basic

- UWF (Brief Therapy)
- Need to deal with basic needs before able to address emotional needs
 - Safety, security
 - Food, shelter
 - Communication and reunification with family

Basic Needs Are Basic

- Staff have their own basic needs
 - Crisis plans need to address them as a priority

Potential Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions

- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety and school avoidance
- Anxiety and trauma-related fears
- Difficulties with concentration
- Deterioration in academic performance

Potential Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions

- Regression
- Depression
 - Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities
- Substance abuse
- Somatization

What to Expect in Schools in Absence of Intervention

- ↓ Cognitive functioning and academic achievement
 - Anxiety, ↓ concentration, sleep problems, depression
- ↑ Absenteeism
 - School avoidance

What to Expect in Schools in Absence of Intervention

- ↑ Suspensions/expulsions
 - Irritability, social regression, substance abuse
- ⇔ ⇔ ↓ Graduation
- Taking time in schools to help children adjust to disaster and aftermath is essential to promote academic achievement

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

- Re-experiencing traumatic event
 - Intrusive images or sense that event is recurring
 - Traumatic dreams
 - Intense distress at reminders

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

- Avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma
 - Psychological numbing
 - Foreshortened future

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

- Increased arousal
 - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
 - Irritability or anger
 - Hypervigilance or exaggerated startle

Range of Reactions to Disaster

- Wide range of reactions and concerns
 - Not just PTSD
- Bereavement
- Secondary losses and stressors
 - Relocations



Range of Reactions to Disaster

- Loss of peer network
- Loss of network of supportive adults
- Loss of community
- Academic failure
- Integrating into new social network
 - Bullying

Range of Reactions to Disaster

- Financial stresses
- Parental stress

Parents Often Underestimate Symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Invite children to share their concerns
 - Wait for them to accept the invitation



Parents Often Underestimate Symptoms

- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness

Factors that Adversely Affect Adjustment

- Direct victimization or witnessing
- Life in jeopardy
- Exposure to horrific scenes
 - Includes media
- Separation from parents
- Loss of belongings
 - Disruption in environment

Factors that Adversely Affect Adjustment

- Prior psychopathology or traumatic experiences
- Parental difficulty in coping
- Lack of supportive family communication style
- Lack of community resources and support

Anticipate Staff Reactions

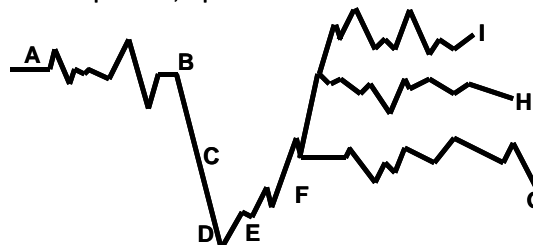
- Typical reactions to crisis (including staff):
 - Ambivalence or conflicting emotions
 - Shame, lowered self-esteem
 - Anger or irritability
 - Distrust or suspiciousness

Anticipate Staff Reactions

- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Reactions often misinterpreted ⇒
blaming, withdrawal, and anger

Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = Baseline functioning
 B = Event
 C = Vulnerable state
 D = Usual coping mechanisms fail
 E = Helplessness, hopelessness
 F = Improved functioning
 G = Continued impairment
 H = Return to baseline
 I = Post-traumatic growth



National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

- Partial list of NCSCB resources
 - Parent guide on supporting a grieving child
 - New York Life Foundation
 - Guidelines for addressing death of student or staff in school
 - Including suicide

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

- Psychological first aid
- Guidance on addressing anniversary of crisis
- Guidance document for school security staff

www.nylgriefguide.com

After a Loved One Dies—
 How Children Grieve
 And how parents and other
 adults can support them



What's Covered in this Guide

- Helping children, helping the family
- Why a parent's role is important
- Helping children understand death
- How children respond to death
- Attending funerals and memorials
- Helping children cope over time
- Calling help
- Taking care of yourself
- Looking to the future

AAP Resources

Disasters Webpage
www.aap.org/disasters

Adjustment Resources
www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment.cfm

Disaster Preparedness for Pediatric
 Practices: An Online Tool
<http://practice.aap.org/disasterpreptool.aspx>

Pediatric Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness:
 A Resource for Pediatricians
www.ahrq.gov/research/pedprep/resource.htm

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