



## Effective Responses

# Crisis Response Following a Crisis

### Resources

- **National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA)**, 1757 Park Road N.W., Washington, DC 20010; 1-800-TRY-NOVA; <http://www.try-nova.org>  
Provides a nationally trained crisis response team which can go to any location to provide crisis aftermath services.
- **National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT)**, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; 301-657-0270; Fax 302-657-0274; <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/index.html>  
Similar to NOVA, this nationally organized team can assist schools in providing post-crisis processing and decision-making.
- **Community Crisis Response**, Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice, 633 Indiana Avenue, NW, Room 1352, Washington, DC 20531; 202-305-4548; fax 202-514-6383; <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/nfores/crt/welcometxt.htm>  
Offers assistance in providing assistance to victims of crime, including counseling and other services.
- **Emergency Planning, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools**, U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan/>.  
Offers numerous resources for schools related to emergency preparedness for terrorism and violence.
- **National School Safety Center**  
1412 Duesenberg Drive, Suite 11, Westlake Village, CA 92362; 805-373-9977; Fax 805-373-9277; <http://www.nssci.org/>  
This center is a resource to schools in planning related to crisis prevention, management and aftermath.
- **National Resource Center for Safe Schools (NRCSS)**, 101 SW Main, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204  
800-268-2275; Fax: (503) 275-0444; <http://www.safetyzone.org/>  
Offers a variety of materials and resources.  
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Crisis situations are known to create fear, anxiety and grief in varying degrees to those directly or indirectly involved, depending on the nature of the trauma, injury, death, or school devastation resulting from the crisis. In addition to school planning to prevent crises and to minimize the effect of crisis while it is occurring, it is also necessary to plan for the period following a school crisis situation. The effect of fear, anxiety, and grief can be severely debilitating and long lasting, and can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder. The primary purpose of crisis response intervention following a crisis situation is to minimize the psychological effects of the crisis by allowing those affected to process the events in which they participated, and thus, to engage in a “healing process.” In addition, post-crisis response assistance can assist educators with a variety of issues that continue after the immediate crisis is concluded.

### What is Crisis Response Following A Crisis?

A crisis response is the mobilization of trained professionals to provide support, processing, and counseling to those affected after a violent incident, suicide, accident, or other crisis situation involving death or injury of students or staff of a school. Typically, this involves a crisis response team within a school district (or a consortium of smaller schools) which has received training to respond to a crisis, and which is available to come to a particular school to lend assistance. The team responds to a crisis alert initiated through the school or district administrators and goes to the crisis school site during or immediately after a crisis. The team then can assist those in charge at the school to organize resources, to request outside assistance if needed, and to make decisions related to crisis aftermath. The team is organized to prioritize degrees of psychological trauma and to immediately begin processing the crisis with those most at risk (Poland & McCormick, 1999). They are also trained to seek out and initiate processing with all who are potentially affected, including bystanders, parents, and community members.

If necessary the crisis response team can also call on outside national resources such as the NOVA or NEAT national crisis response teams. These are similar nationally organized teams that can assist local teams with major or more serious school crisis situations. These teams are available at little or no cost to the local school, and will only come to a school upon being invited by local school officials (Poland & McCormick, 1999).

While we are concerned here mostly with the emotional consequences of a crisis or disaster situation at school, there may also be need for food, shelter, medical care or equipment. These are best coordinated through the American Red Cross and other local emergency preparedness or relief agencies with the assistance of the crisis response team.

Many times the Crisis Response Team can also assist the school leadership team in dealing with a host of other crisis related issues including:

- Planning or coordination of funerals
- Memorial events, memorial sites or symbols, as well as, fund raising and dispersal of funds to victims
- Town or community informational and discussion meetings
- Planning school schedules including event and activity schedules
- Needs of families and friends of suspected perpetrators
- Role of the clergy in these situations in the schools
- Reassuring parents and community regarding school safety
- Community concerns and politics after a crisis
- Dealing with the media, who may seek interviews of students or others on school grounds
- Accessing victim assistance resources and counseling
- Long term consequences of crisis on students, parents, staff, and community

Experience and expertise may be crucial in anticipating potential problems and providing proactive assistance to school leaders in making decisions (Poland & McCormick, 1999).

### **What Do We Know About Post-Crisis Response?**

Like with emergency planning there is virtually no direct empirical research which addresses the outcomes of crisis response interventions specifically in schools or related to school violence. Nevertheless, there is much indirect evidence that such intervention is helpful.

There is evidence that school violence or crisis situations can cause psychological problems or even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder both in victims and in bystanders (Quarles, 1993). Symptoms may include depression or withdrawal, anxiety, fears, disrupted sleep patterns and others. These may be both short-term symptoms and long-term problems for some individuals. Moreover, if left untreated, these problems may lead to more serious long-term mental health problems or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Terr, 1983 as reported by Poland, 1997, p.128). The degree of psychological trauma experienced depends on the circumstances, degree of involvement in the crisis, and other individual factors, and applies to adults as well as children. Not just the victims are traumatized. Bystanders or even people seeing news reports may be affected and have fear or stress related symptoms. Clearly these symptoms can seriously impede a wide variety of students' ability to learn in school.

There is much evidence that processing and counseling immediately after the crisis can reduce or eliminate fear and anxiety in those affected by the crisis, attenuate grief, and minimize the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Poland & McCormick, 1999). One of the most critical factors is permitting and encouraging all involved in the crisis to "process" the incident by telling the story of their experiences and emotions to someone (Poland & McCormick, 1999). While anyone can assist others to do this "processing", individuals with training in active listening and other counseling techniques would be especially effective. For some this occurs naturally, but for others it does not. It is needed for all.

It is also known that some individuals may not recognize the need to engage in this "processing" of the crisis situation, and may need to be sought out and encouraged, even required, to do so. This is often true of adults who believe that they are "handling" their reactions, but whose stress and fear may be simply unnoticed or repressed. Many emergency personnel such as police officers, firemen, and emergency medical technicians are required to engage in this processing after a traumatic incident.

### **Making It Work**

Most often a school district will organize a crisis response team from its counselors, psychologists, school nurses and others. The team or teams will vary in size based on the availability of appropriate members, and the size of the school

district. Team members should have personal qualities which will permit them to work in a crisis environment including the ability to think clearly under stress, flexibility, familiarity with the school system and community, have a calm demeanor, and who are motivated to make a difference (Poland, 1997). The team is chosen both on account of their training and background, as well as their ability to change their schedules to respond to crises. The team meets regularly and receives special training to perform crisis response counseling, make plans, practice deployment of the team, and may be involved in emergency planning and other related tasks within the schools they serve (Decker, 1997). Assistance in obtaining appropriate training or other planning tasks are available from the resources listed.

Crisis response teams must be organized in advance of a crisis situation, and clearly will require administrative support and resources to prepare the team to effectively respond in crisis situations. Preparing for school crisis should be viewed as an ongoing and evolving task, which should be included in job descriptions and responsibilities of members (Hill & Hill, 1993).

### **Summary**

In preparing for an emergency or crisis situation it is not enough to simply get through the situation. Rather it is important to recognize the potentially serious psychological effects of a crisis, and to actively intervene to reduce or minimize those effects. A school crisis response team is an essential element of the "healing process" which must occur after a crisis. The team can assist people to "process" the crisis, as well as assist with many other practical issues in the aftermath of a crisis.

*Reece L. Peterson, June, 2002*

### **References**

- Decker, R.H. (1997). When a Crisis Hits Will Your School Be Ready? Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Hill, M. S., & Hill, F. W. (1993). Creating Safe Schools: What Principals Can Do. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Poland, S. (1997). School crisis teams. In A. Goldstein & J.C. Conoley School Violence Intervention: A Practical Handbook. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (1999). Coping with Crisis: Lessons Learned, A Resource for Schools, Parents, and Communities. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Quarles, C. L. (1993). Staying Safe at School. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

### **Resources (Continued)**

- Poland, S., & McCormick, J. (1999). Coping with Crisis: Lessons Learned, A Resource for Schools, Parents, and Communities. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

This book is a comprehensive resource book for educators on crises, and provides much practical information about setting up post-crisis response systems.

### **About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project**

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

Russell Skiba, Indiana Education Policy Ctr., 170 Smith Ctr., 2805 E. 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Bloomington, IN 47408 812-855-1240 [skiba@indiana.edu](mailto:skiba@indiana.edu), or

Reece L. Peterson, 202A Barkley Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0732 4020472-5480 [rpeterson1@unl.edu](mailto:rpeterson1@unl.edu) ©2003 Skiba & Peterson