

School Safety, Part 3: The Aftermath of the Crisis

By Howard Johnston and Ronald Williamson

Once a crisis is finally over, the intruder removed, the severe weather abated, the fire out, the epidemic ended, or the explosives proven to be a hoax, important work remains. There is relief, perhaps sadness or grief over the school community's losses, and a sense of calm – something like that following a hurricane or blizzard.

Now, school leaders confront three of the most difficult issues in dealing with a school crisis – repairing the physical damage, if there has been any, restoring orderly routines to the school, and the much more challenging task of reducing anxiety and restoring confidence and calm in the school community.

Restoring physical and organizational normalcy is challenging, but progress in doing so is concrete and observable. It is much more difficult to address the silent, insidious and subtle psychological and emotional effects of the school crisis – the corrosive effects of sustained fear, anxiety and anger often experienced by the survivors of a serious crisis.

Unfortunately, there have been enough school crises in America so that these issues have been studied in some detail. Fortunately, these studies provide sound guidance to school leaders intent on restoring both the organizational and emotional health of their schools in the aftermath of a crisis.

Guidelines for School Leaders

The U. S. Department of Education's division of Safe and Drug Free Schools publication, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* (<http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/crisisplanning.pdf>) provides a comprehensive model for school crisis planning and intervention that has served as the foundation for this series of articles. This model calls for four major components:

- **Mitigation and Prevention** – reducing the likelihood of a school crisis through careful attention to the needs of students and the community
- **Preparedness** – facilitating a rapid, coordinated, effective response to a crisis if it occurs
- **Response** – following the crisis plan and making full use of all available resources
- **Recovery** – returning to learning and restoring the infrastructure as quickly as possible



The *Guide* describes key features and actions for a rapid and effective recovery, including several that show attention to the special needs of young people in a school setting. This sensitivity is a crucial ingredient in assuring a full recovery from the school crisis and must permeate every aspect of the school's plan for healing itself.

- Strive to return to learning as quickly as possible.
- Restore the physical plant, as well as the school community.
- Monitor how staff assess students for the emotional impact of the crisis.
- Identify what follow up interventions are available to students, staff, and first responders.
- Conduct debriefings with staff and first responders.
- Assess curricular activities that address the crisis.
- Allocate appropriate time for recovery.
- Plan how anniversaries of events will be commemorated.
- Capture "lessons learned" and incorporate them into revisions and trainings.

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Psychological and Emotional Responses

The National Association of School Psychologists (www.nasponline.org) provides a rich resource of materials for school leaders and communities that are facing the aftermath of a crisis in their school. From individual acts of violence to natural disasters and terrorism, NASP offers research-based action steps for school officials that respond to the psychological and emotional needs of crisis victims while respecting the cultural and religious norms that exist in the school's community. Their recommendations are summarized in a general model for dealing with the aftermath of a crisis published by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, *Early Warning, Timely Response* (<http://cecp.air.org/guide/>).

This report is an excellent guide for school leaders and offers a planning checklist to assure comprehensive attention to key topics and issues. The report recommends that members of the crisis team should understand natural stress reactions. They also should be familiar with how different individuals might respond to death and loss, including developmental considerations, religious beliefs, and cultural values. Effective schools ensure a coordinated community response. Professionals both within the school district and within the greater community should be involved to assist individuals who are at risk for severe stress reactions.

Schools that have experienced crises and tragedy have included the following activities in their response plans. These recommendations are noteworthy for their emphasis on restoring mental health and emotional balance and have a unique emphasis on assisting with the return of students who may have been actors in the school crisis.

Help parents understand children's reactions to violence or disaster. In the aftermath of tragedy, children may experience unrealistic fears of the future, have difficulty sleeping, become physically ill, and be easily distracted to name a few of the common symptoms.

Help teachers and other staff deal with their reactions to the crisis. Debriefing and grief counseling is just as important for adults as it is for students. Help students and faculty adjust after the crisis. Provide both short-term and long-term mental health counseling following a crisis.

Help victims and family members of victims re-enter the school environment. Often, school friends need guidance in how to act. The school community should work with students and parents to design a plan that makes it easier for victims and their classmates to adjust.

Help students and teachers address the return of a previously removed student to the school community. Whether the student is returning from a juvenile detention facility or a mental health facility, schools need to coordinate with staff from that facility to explore how to make the transition as uneventful as possible.



Adult Roles

Ultimately, the adults in the school assume responsibility for restoring the emotional and mental health of the students and staff exposed to a crisis. First, it is necessary to understand how young people are likely to respond to a crisis: what is 'normal' in the face of trauma? In *Tips for Talking to Children After a Disaster: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (<http://tinyurl.com/cypjyho>), The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Mental Health Information Center describes common effects of school trauma on adolescents:

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- Children age 12 to 14 are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, schoolwork, and other responsibilities they previously handled. Though they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as alcohol or drug use.
- These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as “normal” by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.
- In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

The Mental Health Information Center also offers specific tips for talking with students about disaster and trauma:

- Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they are seeing on television and to ask questions.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you can't answer all their questions.
- Answer questions at a level the child can understand.
- Provide ongoing opportunities for children to talk. They will probably have more questions as time goes on.
- Use this as an opportunity to establish a family emergency plan. Feeling that there is something you can do may be very comforting to both children and adults.
- Allow children to discuss other fears and concerns about unrelated issues. This is a good opportunity to explore these issues also.
- Monitor children's television watching. Some parents may wish to limit their child's exposure to graphic or troubling scenes. To the extent possible, watch reports of the disaster with children. It is at these times that questions might arise.
- Help children understand that there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of reactions is normal. Encourage children to express their feelings to adults (including teachers and parents) who can help them understand their sometimes strong and troubling emotions.
- Try not to focus on blame.

In addition to the tragic things they see, help children identify good things, such as heroic actions, families who are grateful for being reunited, and the assistance offered by people throughout the country and the world.

Everyone agrees that the aftermath of a school crisis requires on-going attention and empathic leadership. David Schonfeld and Scott Newgass, from the Yale Child Study Center's National Center for Children Exposed to Violence, summarize the critical elements of this on-going response (<http://www.ncccev.org/docs/OVCSchoolcrisisBulletin.pdf>).

- Utilize principles of mental health triage to get counseling services to those most in need of them – usually the individuals closest to the crisis event and its victims.
- Plan for long-term follow up to assist with immediate post-trauma counseling and cope with the reactions that may develop over time. Monitor students and faculty closely for evidence of delayed traumatic stress.
- Plan for memorialization of the event in a way that is healing, dignified and respects the different ways in which individuals and cultures express grief and sorrow. Be particularly mindful that the decisions about memorials will set a precedent for other, perhaps less tragic, events.

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Social Media Tools

There are many social media tools that school leaders can use to help with the aftermath of a crisis. Here are five we've seen used to share information with families and community about efforts to restore normalcy and calm. They are helpful ways to link families directly to resources they can use to deal with the aftermath of a crisis.

Facebook (www.facebook.com)	Share information and link to resources that families may find helpful
Twitter (www.twitter.com)	
School or Principal's blog (www.blogger.com)	Share stories about how students and staff are recovering from a crisis. Link to resources and information.
YouTube (www.youtube.com)	Use these tools to share short videos or photos of the recovery and return to normalcy.
Flickr (www.flickr.com)	
Instagram (www.instagram.com)	
NOTE: Your school Facebook or Twitter account can link to your blog or photos and videos about the recovery.	

A Final Word

No one likes to think about a school crisis and the horrible tragedies that might accompany it. But just as religious and cultural rituals help to heal and comfort bereaved, grieving individuals, a comprehensive, carefully developed, sensitive, culturally-responsive plan for dealing with the aftermath of a school disaster will speed the healing of its victims and the school's return to the business of learning.

References and Resources

National Association of School Psychologists

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx

NASP provides a virtual library of resources for crisis management and response for all kinds of potential threats – violence, terrorism, natural disasters, epidemics, and a host of others.

American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/topics>

This venerable group has a superb library of online and printed materials dealing with all aspects of crisis mitigation and response. They even provide reading and counseling material for students who have survived a crisis.

Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools Crisis Management Workbook

<http://www.fcps.edu/fts/safety-security/publications/cmw.pdf>

This online publication outlines a very thorough and concrete planning process, including preparing for the aftermath of a school crisis.

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://tinyurl.com/cunf784>

AAP provides a comprehensive list of post-crisis resources to help students and families adjust to the trauma they have experienced.

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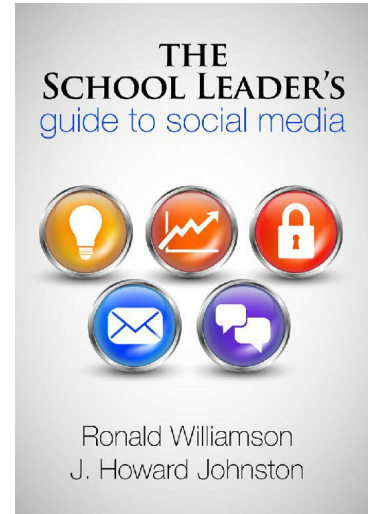
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This article is one in a series on school safety presented by *Practical Leadership* (www.mypracticalleadership.com). Others focus on planning and preparation, creating a climate and culture of safety in your school, and dealing with the aftermath of a crisis.

Some material adapted from: Williamson, R. & Johnston, J. H. (2012). *The School Leader's Guide to Social Media*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. (<http://www.eyeoneducation.com/bookstore/productdetails.cfm?sku=7218-5&title=the-school-leader%27s-guide-to-social-media>)



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