



Law Enforcement and Security Personnel in the Schools:

Recognizing and Responding to Crisis and Loss in the Student Body

Most schools have crisis and response plans in place which detail actions and responsibilities of law enforcement and security personnel working in schools for

- Death of student or staff
- School violence
- Community disaster

You have an essential and important role in a school's response plan. You ensure students and staff are physically safe. You can play an important role in supporting children in the aftermath of a crisis or loss.

Your understanding of the impact of crisis and loss events on students and your actions in the aftermath of such events will contribute to your ability to

- Prevent additional problems on the school campus
- Create a safe environment or school climate that will encourage students to remain in school
- Serve as a role model for students

This document is intended to provide you with important information on how crisis and loss can impact students' behaviors and what actions you can take to improve the overall school climate after such events.

Crises may be events that impact the entire school or may be events that only impact individual students.

Children do not leave home or neighborhood traumas and loss behind when they come to school. They bring them to campus as they struggle to work through their thoughts and emotions about the crisis or loss.

Following a crisis or loss, children's reactions affect their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Remember, students are in the middle of their overall development. As such, they are unlikely to always make the best (or even good) decisions, especially when stressed by a crisis.

- Children may worry about family members, friends, and even their pets.
- They may worry that the crisis may happen again.
- They may be struggling with how the crisis or loss will impact their lives.
- Children may react with a change in their behaviors.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE

As students seek support, they may congregate in hallways or loiter outside.

What you can consider:

It will be important to determine if the gathering is part of students' expected need to connect with peers after a crisis or loss or if the gatherings of students may pose a threat.

What you can do:

If you determine the students are seeking connection with peers, consider gently redirecting them to support rooms or classrooms where they can more appropriately receive support from peers, rather than simply enforcing school rules and dispersing or punishing the students who are in need of help.

If you are concerned that the gathering may pose a threat, consider dispersing students to their classrooms and discuss the situation with school administration.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE

Isolation after a crisis or loss is also common with some students.

What you can consider:

Students who remove themselves from the school community may be the very students who need the most support after a crisis or loss.

By being a trusted and respected individual on the campus, you are in an excellent position to learn what is being talked about after a crisis and to be told of any potential concerns that may arise.

If students view you as a role model or a mentor, they may turn to you as a source of support. Students tend to *seek out those adults they trust* rather than adults who may have assigned roles to help them after a crisis (e.g., guidance counselors, school nurses, etc).

What you can do:

Talk to students on campus on a regular basis. This way, they get to know you and trust you. Learn names as this creates an increased sense of trust and they are more likely to approach you if problems arise.

Consider meeting with campus student council and their advisor on a regular basis to listen to any concerns they may have. This will also make you more visible, increasing the chance that student leaders will turn to you as one of the school personnel when there is a crisis.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE

Students may not attend as readily to instructions or questions from law enforcement and security personnel in the schools.

What you can consider:

Students may have problems with attention and concentration. Because of their stress in reacting to the crisis, students may appear to be ignoring you or purposefully being evasive when they simply were not attending well to what you said.

What you can do:

Repeat your question or instruction again, making sure you have good eye contact with the students. Keep your voice calm. Give your instructions in a brief and clear manner.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE

You may see increased irritability in students with more negative interactions, both verbal and physical.

What you can consider:

You will need to assess the seriousness of these infractions. Disciplinary actions that are not balanced with a supportive understanding and caring approach may simply result in an escalation of misbehavior.

If the behavior is a “cry for help” which the student doesn’t think you have heard, the student may just increase the “volume.”

What you can do:

Consider taking the student aside so that classmates are not listening to your conversation. This may de-escalate any angry outburst.

- Acknowledge that everyone in the school community is trying to handle the crisis or loss the best way possible.
- Provide a suggestion for dealing the outburst
 - You are available to listen
 - You can accompany the student to the counselor
 - You can walk them back to class after peers have been dispersed in order to decrease the student's sense that "everyone is watching."
- Be available for students to talk to or check in with them from time to time is an important way to glean information about how students may be handling events and more readily avoid explosive situations.
- Accompany the student to the appropriate place (office, guidance counselor, etc) if you determine the infraction may be harmful to other students.

Knowing students in your school personally can help you determine which students may be at increased risk for difficulties after a student death.

- Students who are family and friends of the deceased may have more difficulties than other students.
- Students who may have bullied the deceased may act out more due to feelings of guilt or shame.
- Students you have worried about as potentially problematic in the past are also students who may have greater difficulty after a crisis or loss has impacted the school community.

WHAT YOU MAY SEE

Informal memorials may arise, including seeming acts of vandalism such as writing on a deceased student's locker.

What you can consider:

Students may use these writings as an outpouring of emotion rather than trying to "take advantage" of the crisis situation.

What you can do:

Work with school leadership to create more appropriate means to commemorate and memorialize. Work with leadership to determine appropriate actions for students wishing to "leave a message."

Note: Not all students will show their reactions. Students may look good on the outside and be struggling to cope with the crisis or loss and its aftermath on the inside. They may even tell you that they are fine.

What you can do:

Touch base with these students. By checking in on a regular basis, you signal that you can be trusted to talk to and, thereby, increase the likelihood that students will come to you with concerns. Again, when students see you as someone they can turn to in a crisis, they are more likely to share information that may prevent escalation of problems in the future.

By working in tandem with the peer support network, you may be more effective in learning key information that will allow you to intervene (in conjunction with other school personnel) to provide necessary services that can de-escalate problems and keep students in the learning environment.

Students' reactions are variable, meaning that not all students will react in the same way or on the same timetable. Students may seem to be doing better, but may have grief and crisis trigger points that can increase their reactions.

Examples of these include:

- Important school events (dances, special ceremonies, special sporting events)
- Birthday of the deceased
- Holidays

When these grief or trauma triggers occur, children may become overwhelmed and acutely distressed and behave in ways that appear out of character or inappropriate. Examples of these actions include:

- Students may become more disruptive following an assembly designed to increase school spirit for the game following the death of a student athlete
- Students may not return to their classes as scheduled, congregating near the assembly area following a special school program.

When you can identify potential triggers, you will be able to plan ahead and be watchful of potential problems.

CONFLICTING ROLES

In the aftermath of a crisis or loss, security officers may have conflicting roles with students.

- Preserving a crime scene vs. minimizing the disturbing images students or staff may see.
- Conducting an investigation which will include asking troubling questions of students and staff vs. supporting the victims and witnesses.

You can successfully carry out both roles with the least conflict when you understand how students may respond to crisis and loss and how you can best support them. Work with school personnel so they are aware of necessary actions you must take in the aftermath of a school crisis or loss. They can help notify students, staff, and parents about steps you will be taking as one way to increase awareness and the likelihood of compliance rather than misunderstanding.

Law enforcement and security personnel in the schools are important *resources* for students, not *sources*.

What you can do:

- Work with other school personnel to
 - synchronize facts,

- determine how these will be delivered
- provide appropriate information.
- Recognize information will change with time and be an active partner with school administrators and other student resources to ensure that you are aware of how the crisis and loss are being managed.
- Know what resources are available for students after the crisis or loss. Children struggling with emotional or behavioral issues are more likely to create problems in the school environment. As early attention to the problems can reduce difficulties, knowing about the resources and directing students and staff to these services can increase your abilities to maintain a safe and secure school environment.

These actions can further help your efforts to ensure de-escalation of potential problems.

You are an active part of any school crisis plan. Your input will be invaluable as school personnel understand issues related to threat assessment and make decisions related to response. While it may be the responsibility of others in your school's crisis response team to deal with behavioral and mental health needs of students, your actions can help them be more successful in their job. In turn, mental health professionals can be very helpful in identifying potential threats and informing and working with you to address them.

What you can consider:

Watching students in distress can be distressing in itself. Both students and staff may be reacting to the loss. Furthermore, ***no one is immune when a loss occurs***. Do not discount the impact of a loss on you.

When students are involved in a crisis, it is common for responders such as law enforcement and security personnel in the schools to consider how their actions or behaviors may have created different outcomes. Feelings of guilt are often present as are feelings of sadness related to the loss. Acknowledging these reactions and being aware of the impact on you will ultimately allow you to be better at your job.

In the end, your understanding and response to a school crisis or loss increases the positive outcomes for the students, staff and your safety and the safety of other law enforcement and security personnel in the schools.