

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Crisis Management in Children and Adolescents Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

A crisis event can happen at anytime. Crises such as a schoolyard shooting, student suicide or death of a teacher, can emotionally debilitate teachers and classmates. If a family or friend has been seriously injured or killed or if a child's, school or home has been damaged or a change in the environment has occurred, there is a greater chance that the child will experience difficulties coping. Whatever the circumstance, the emotional effects on children can be tremendous. These external factors have a direct effect on the child's mental and emotional feelings. This could result in the need for crisis management and intervention.

Why do we care?

When compared to their developmental peers, children in crisis:

- May resort to drugs/alcohol to ameliorate the pain
- Are at risk for suicide

Age-appropriate reactions and related symptoms associated with crisis:

Childhood

- Sadness and crying
- School avoidance
- Physical complaints (headache or stomach ache)
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Regressive behavior
- Aggressive behavior
- Anxious
- Confusion
- Withdrawal/social isolation
- Attention seeking behavior

Early Adolescence

- Withdrawal/ isolation from peers
- Loss of interest in activities
- Rebelliousness
- Generalized anxiety
- School difficulty, including fighting
- Fear of personal harm
- Poor school performance
- Depression
- Concentration difficulties

Adolescence

- Anxiety and feelings of guilt
- Poor concentration and distractibility
- Psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headaches)
- Antisocial behavior
- Agitation or decrease in energy level
- Poor school performance
- Peer problems
- Withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed

When is help needed?

Help from a physician, mental health professional and/or clergy will be needed if the child or adolescent:

- Threatens or attempts suicide.
- Has reactions that are so intense that they interfere with daily functioning over a prolonged period of time.
- Re-experiences the trauma through flashbacks, hallucinations, or, with children, a constant reenactment through play.
- Exhibits aggressive violent, or intensely irrational behavior.
- Excessively uses alcohol and/or drugs.

What can we do about it?

- Become a more active observer of student behavior in and around the classroom.
- Consult with school personnel who are trained in crisis response and crisis intervention.
- Inform caregivers and school clinicians about your observations of the student.
- Education of students regarding likely responses to the crisis is essential.
- Give students an opportunity to discuss their feelings and reactions to the crisis.
- Create a feedback loop with caregivers and school clinicians to reassess student symptoms.
- Ask school clinicians to present on different treatment approaches for crisis intervention and management.
- When students are discussing their feelings, listen in a non-critical and non-judgmental manner, with empathy and support.
- Allow students to express themselves through other modes of communication, especially those students who are hesitant to verbalize their feelings.
- Develop classroom activities and assignments, and homework assignments that address students' feelings regarding crisis.
- Crisis intervention is ongoing, further discussions may need to ensue and address residual feelings regarding the crisis.

Key Resources/Links

American National Red Cross. (2001). *American Red Cross materials dealing with unexpected events.*

Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/pubs/dpubs/tewrormat.html>

- *Helping Young Children Cope with Trauma:* on-line brochure designed for parents and caregivers
- *When Bad Things Happen:* on-line brochure designed for junior high school students
- *Why Do I Feel Like This? :* on-line brochure designed for high school students

- American Psychological Association. (n.d.) *Reactions and guidelines for children following trauma/disaster*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/daily/ptguidelines.html>
- Cash, R. (2004). Depression in adolescents: When it really hurts to be a teenager. *Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators*. National Association of School Psychologists. <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/intonline/depression.pdf>
- Hamblen, J. (2002). PTSD in children and adolescents: A National Center for PTSD fact sheet. Retrieved from http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_children.html
- Huberty, T. (2006). Depression: Helping students in the classroom. *National Association of School Psychologists Communique Vol. 35(3)*.
<http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/cq353depression.aspx>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2005). *Family guide: What families should know about adolescent depression and treatment options*. Retrieve December 7, 2005 from
http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/CAAC/Family_Guide_final.pdf.

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