

INFO-SHEET

Mental Health Literacy for Educators Helping Children and Youth after Tragic Events

After a tragic incident, it can be difficult to know what to do to support children and youth who have been affected or influenced by these events. You may observe that students appear upset, sad, anxious or tired, and/or you may notice a range of physical complaints. Reactions will vary according to students' development stage, physical or emotional proximity to the event, and prior experience with traumatic circumstances.

In the days, and sometimes weeks, following a tragic event, these reactions are not uncommon, and typically will subside over time as students have an opportunity to talk through feelings, to be reassured that they are safe and protected, and to gain perspective.

COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAGIC EVENTS

SADNESS	ANGER OR IRRITABILITY
ANXIETY	SOCIAL DISTANCING
FATIGUE	PHYSICAL COMPLAINTS
LACK OF FOCUS	ABSENTEEISM

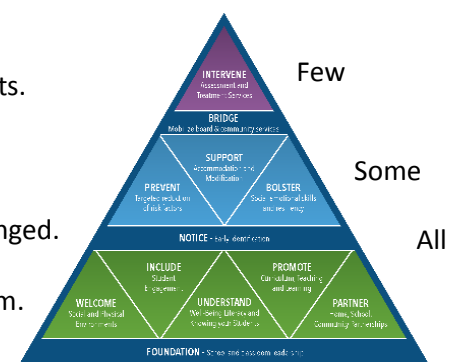
As a caring adult in students' lives, there are many ways you can provide support:

1. Maintain a calm classroom environment
2. Support students as they work through strong feelings after a tragic event, in the course of daily school life
3. Notice when a student is struggling and may require additional support
4. Offer classroom accommodations to students struggling with social emotional concerns after a tragic event
5. Assist struggling students and their families to access more intensive support, as needed.

Note - To provide needed support for your students, remember that you need to engage in your own self-care. Tragic events affect individuals in different ways, and you are not immune to the impact of these circumstances. Take time to process your thoughts and emotions with colleagues, friends, family, or using professional mental health assistance as needed, so that you are able to be present and helpful to students.

1. SUPPORT FOR ALL – Maintain a calm classroom environment

- During times of tragedy, the reactions of adults will set the tone for students.
- Set a calm pace for learning, relaxing deadlines as needed.
- Maintain normal, predictable routines.
- Reduce the emphasis on and/or duration of formal lessons.
- Consider if any sensitive curriculum content might need to be delayed/changed.
- Use learning activities that allow you to float and check-in with students.
- Create quiet spaces for student reflection and dialogue within the classroom.
- Encourage students to take breaks from news and social media.



2. SUPPORT FOR ALL – Support students as they work through strong feelings after a tragic event

- Rather than raising this at a class level, invite students to initiate conversations when the time is right for them.
- Listen well, and notice how your students are viewing the situation.
- Keep explanations of events age-appropriate and factual.
- Calm worries, re-affirm safety procedures, and reassure students that they are safe.
- Validate feelings of sadness, anger, anxiety, etc. and note that it may take time to work through these emotions.
- Encourage students to draw on their faith, natural supports, self-care skills, and other sources of strength.
- Model compassion, positive coping and self-care skills.
- Help students to notice blessings, quiet heroes, and signs of hope.

3. SUPPORT FOR SOME – Notice when a student is struggling and may require additional support

- Make a list of students who may be at risk given proximity to the tragic event, prior trauma, etc.
- Monitor these students more closely, checking in with them each day.
- Be mindful that there may be students without an obvious link or vulnerability who may experience difficulty.
- Watch for changes in student behavior and/or emotions that are excessive in duration and intensity.
- Watch for signs that student behavior and/or emotions is interfering with day to day functioning at school.
- If you have concerns, record your observations and consult with appropriate staff (e.g., principal, social worker).
- Discuss your concerns with the student in a compassionate and age-appropriate manner.
- Use regular school/class protocols to connect with parents/guardians to discuss your observations and concerns.

4. SUPPORT FOR SOME - Offer classroom accommodations to students struggling after a tragic event

- Welcome students who may be more at risk, in a calm, caring, and intentional way each day.
- Let these students know about available school supports and how to access them.
- Create opportunities for quiet check-ins and dialogue.
- Maintain academic expectations, but soften these if a student seems overwhelmed.
- Help students to complete school tasks by chunking assignments, pairing them with another student, etc.
- Offer more time for test and assignment completion, as needed.
- Allow students to cue you if they are struggling and want to talk, or need to step back from a task for a time
- Help these students to engage in activities that may assist with healing (e.g., write a card, make a donation, etc.)

5. SUPPORT FOR FEW – Assist struggling students and their families to access support

- Know about available supports at the school, board, and community level.
- Know your local pathway to accessing services.
- Work with the school team to describe available supports to the parent/guardian and/or student.
- With parent/guardian consent, share your observations to assist with referrals and treatment planning.
- Continue to provide classroom accommodations to students struggling after a tragic event.
- Use classroom strategies recommended by the service provider.

Personal Resiliency and Self-Care

As noted above, tragic events can be emotionally challenging for us as educators. It is not uncommon for grief reactions in ourselves, and in our students, to last many days or weeks. The following strategies can be helpful to encourage personal resiliency during difficult times.

- Take the opportunity to process the situation and your feelings with your friends, family and colleagues.
- Keep regular schedules and routines.
- Remember to eat, sleep, play, exercise, and laugh.
- Practice positive ways of coping with sadness, fear, anger, and worry.
- Ask for help. This is not an experience that you have to face alone.

GETTING HELP

Every Ontario school board has a Mental Health Leader who works to support schools with resources and coaching support. To find the Mental Health Leader for your board, visit smh-assist.ca, and use the pull-down menu to find your board.

School Mental Health ASSIST is a provincial implementation team, working alongside the Ministry of Education, to support Ontario's 72 school boards and four school authorities in their efforts to enhance student mental health and well-being.

Visit us: smh-assist.ca @SMHASSIST

Sources: Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board; Ottawa-Carleton District School Board; Peel District School Board; Simcoe-Muskoka Catholic District School Board; Toronto Catholic District School Board; Toronto District School Board; The Fred Rogers Company; the Child Mind Institute; PBS Parents; National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).