Terrorism and Disaster Center
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

Helping Students Cope with Media Coverage of Disasters: A Fact Sheet for Teachers and School Staff

Disasters can be chaotic, confusing, and frightening events, both for those who experience them directly and for those who learn about them through the media.

Experiencing a disaster directly can cause posttraumatic stress reactions, anxiety, fear, worry, grief, and behavioral problems in young people. Media coverage of disasters can also cause distress in children and adolescents.

This means that young people who live through a disaster may be further upset by media coverage of that disaster, and also that youth living far from a disaster can become afraid or worried by media coverage of a disaster that occurs somewhere else.

This fact sheet provides an overview of how media coverage of a disaster may affect students and suggests strategies that people working in schools can use to address these effects. The strategies described in this fact sheet can be used by teachers, school counselors, school social workers, other school staff members, and school administrators.

Media Coverage of Disasters

While each disaster is different, the news media use common practices when covering disasters. These include:

- A tendency to focus on the most sensational aspects of the disaster (such as death, injury, destruction).
- Repetitive use of emotion-stirring images and video (such as buildings burning or cars overturned).

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Youth exposure to media coverage of disasters is most likely to occur via TV or the Internet. Therefore, for most of this factsheet we discuss the disaster media coverage that youth "view" or "see" on TV or online. However, students may also hear about disasters on the radio or read about disasters in newspapers or magazines. Therefore teachers and school staff need to consider students' exposure to disaster coverage in all forms of media.

The Effects of Media Coverage of Disasters on Children and Adolescents

Because the news media often focus on the most frightening aspects of disasters, viewing disaster media coverage can be emotionally upsetting for children and adolescents.

Youth who view media coverage may be afraid, worried, or anxious. They may not be able to sleep because of these reactions or may not be able to stop thinking about what they have seen or heard. Students may be distracted while in class because they are thinking about the event or they may not be able to pay attention to their class work because they are tired from not sleeping well.

Reactions such as fear and worry result from youth thinking that what they see on TV or the Internet could happen to them, their family, or their friends.

Disasters covered in the media do not have to occur close to home to be upsetting for children and adolescents. Media coverage of a major disaster like the September 11th terrorist attacks or Hurricane Katrina can upset youth residing far from those events. Older youth may be able to distinguish between disasters that are closer to, or farther from home, but younger children may not be able to make that distinction. Teachers and school staff should be aware that any disaster depicted in the media has the potential to affect a student and that youth may not be able to accurately estimate their vulnerability to a natural or human-caused event.

The more disaster media coverage students see, the more afraid or upset they may become. Media coverage of a disaster may cause youth to worry about what is happening, which in turn causes them to want to watch more of the disaster coverage to get more information, which can then cause them to worry even more.

Younger children may be even more frightened by disaster media coverage than older youth. Video and images of injury, death, and destruction may be particularly upsetting for younger students.

Given the potential of media coverage of disasters to frighten or upset young people, what can you as a teacher or school staff member do? The next section describes strategies you can use to prevent or reduce the distress students experience in reaction to disaster media coverage.

Strategies for Helping Students Cope with Disaster Media Coverage

When a major disaster is covered in the news, one way teachers and school staff can help students is by explaining the event.

Explaining media coverage of disaster includes:

- ***Helping students understand what has happened and what is happening.*** This may include discussing where the disaster happened (e.g., how close the disaster was to where your students live) and why it occurred. This may also include clarifying any misconceptions students have about the disaster. Students may not always understand what actually occurred in a disaster. For example, after the September 11th terrorist attacks many younger children did know what the World Trade Center was or what a terrorist did. Teachers and school staff can provide answers to basic questions about what actually happened, and this information and explanation may reduce a student's uncertainty about the event as well as the resulting worry.

- ***Putting the disaster in context.*** This may include letting students know how likely it is that a disaster like the one covered in the media could happen

where the students live. For example, if your school is in Minnesota, being affected by a hurricane is unlikely and this information may reassure students.

- ***Connecting the disaster to lesson plans.*** Explaining what happened in a recent disaster can be explored through history, geography, social studies, and science lesson plans. The American Red Cross provides curriculum materials that help teachers explain disasters to students in the classroom. Also, the New York Times often develops lesson plans that may help teachers discuss a recent disaster. For more details on both of these sources of teaching materials, see the "Additional Information" section at the end of this document.

- ***Informing students about the nature of the media and news coverage.*** Discuss with students how the news typically shows the scariest parts of any situation and repeats those parts over and over. This may help students understand that repeated images or video of death and destruction are not the only thing happening.

- ***Reminding students that there are plenty of good things going on in the world.*** Talk with students about the good things that are occurring in your community. Discuss with students how positive events do not make the news, but happen all the time. It may also help to discuss with students that there are lots of good people helping during a disaster (such as emergency responders, medical personnel, the government, and volunteers).

- ***Assuring students that they are safe.*** Explain to students that they are safe and that their family and all the adults at school will always do everything they can to keep them safe.

Following a disaster, teachers and school staff often have an opportunity to help students cope with a disaster by talking about the event.

Don't assume that a student's parents have already discussed the disaster with their child. Parents may have been too busy to talk about the events with their children or

may not have known what to say. Children may be upset about the disaster but not want to bring it up with their parents because they think it will upset their parents more. And even if parents have talked about a disaster with their children, students may have remaining questions that they did not want to ask their parents.

As a teacher or school staff member you may not always know what to say to a student about a disaster, but listening to students' concerns, providing explanations about what happened, and giving assurances of care and safety will help. For older or more mature youth, a more critical discussion of the disaster and feelings related to the disaster may be helpful. But for all children, start by listening, explaining events, clarifying what happened, and providing assurances of safety and expressions of comfort.

Helping Students Deal with their Emotions

Students may feel confused and overwhelmed by their emotional reactions to disaster media coverage. They may need your help to sort through their feelings.

Helping a student deal with an emotional event includes:

- Being aware of your own emotions, and taking steps to cope with them in a healthy way that allows you to "be there" for students.
- Being available to discuss the event with students.
- Listening to what students say and validating their emotions.
- Providing honest responses to students, without overwhelming them with information.

- Encouraging students to talk about the event. If students are having difficulty talking about what is happening, use open-ended questions to start a conversation. (Examples of questions you might ask include: How do you feel about what happened? What do you think happened? Why do you think this happened?)
- Reassuring students that they are safe and that their family and the school staff will do everything they can to keep them safe.

Be aware of your own emotions. Being able to talk about the disaster will help students. To do so, you may need to take steps to control your own emotions so that you can listen to, talk with, and reassure students. It is natural to be upset and worried following a disaster, but sharing all of your own fears with students can overwhelm them. Teachers are models of emotional reactions and coping skills for their students. If students see you dealing in a healthy and honest way with your emotions and realize that it is possible to cope with even difficult or negative emotions and circumstances, they may feel reassured as a result and may learn good emotional reactions in the process.

Consider referring students who are very upset about a disaster to the school counselor or social worker. Following a traumatic event like a disaster—even one that happens far away from the school but is featured in the news—schools may want to establish plans that help teachers easily refer students who are particularly upset about the events to counselors or social workers who can provide individual or group care for those students.

Helping Students Develop Good Coping Skills

Teachers can help students develop good coping skills. One way to cope following a disaster is to find a way to help those affected by the disaster. Teachers can help students identify ways to help such as making a donation of money or goods to a disaster relief agency. Donating time to a local community organization could have a positive impact on the community even if it is not directly related to a specific disaster. Classrooms and entire schools may decide that they want to participate in an activity together to help those affected by a disaster. A school food drive might allow an entire school to come together to cope with their feelings about a disaster and help those affected in the process.

Another way that teachers can help students cope with the fear and uncertainty caused by media coverage of a disaster is to promote family disaster planning. Encourage students to help their families create a disaster plan and compile a disaster kit. These activities advance preparedness and decrease anxiety while also giving families opportunities to share. Information on how to create a family preparedness plan is available in the "Additional Information" section at the end of this document. Teachers can, and should, also share details about the school and classroom disaster preparedness plans, which can further reassure students.

School Policy – Media Coverage of Disasters

Disasters and other traumatic events may occur during school hours. For example, the September 11th terrorist attacks occurred while many children were at school. Because classrooms often have televisions and Internet access, school administrators need to decide whether students will be allowed to watch traumatic events like a disaster or terrorist attack on school televisions or computers if an event occurs during school hours.

If students are allowed to watch potentially traumatic events, then teachers, counselors, social workers, and other school staff need to be available to answer students' questions about what has happened and to provide comfort and assurances of safety. If schools are not able to provide this support, then schools should consider not allowing students to watch such events.

Younger students (younger than 8 years old) may have difficulty comprehending news coverage that is intended for adults, so preventing younger students from watching media coverage of disasters is recommended. Whatever schools decide, school administrators are encouraged to develop a disaster media policy that applies to the entire school or school district. The policy should address all students in the school. This will prevent individual teachers from having to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to allow students to watch disaster news.

A policy that does not allow students to watch media coverage of traumatic events in school does not mean those students will not find out about what happened. For example, students may learn about disasters from their cell or smart phones. With so much access to technology, students may even find out about a disaster before teachers and school staff. Additionally, if a disaster occurs one day students will arrive at school the next day aware of what has happened and potentially in need of support from teachers and school staff to deal with their reactions to the events. Therefore, there is no way to prevent students from finding out about "bad news," but schools and people who work in schools can be ready to help students cope with such events.

Summary

- ✓ Media coverage of disasters can worry or frighten students.
- ✓ A disaster does not have to occur in your community for media coverage to affect students.
- ✓ The news media tend to emphasize the most frightening aspects of disaster.
- ✓ The most important thing teachers and school staff can do is to talk about disaster media coverage with students.
- ✓ Dealing with your own emotions about a disaster will help you "be there" for your students.
- ✓ You can teach good coping skills to your students.
- ✓ Help students find positive ways to cope with the disaster by helping others.
- ✓ Schools should develop policies that indicate whether students are allowed to watch news coverage of disasters at school.

Additional Information

Information on how to talk to children about disasters is available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters

Information for youth about the causes of disasters and how to be disaster prepared is available from FEMA for Kids:
http://www.fema.gov/kids

Curriculum materials addressing disaster preparedness and information about different disasters are available from the American Red Cross' "Master of Disaster" curriculum:
http://www.redcross.org

Lesson plans focused on current events, including disasters, are often available from the New York Times' The Learning Network:
http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/category/lesson-plans

Instructions for developing a family emergency plan are available from Ready America:
http://www.ready.gov/make-a-plan

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