



Supporting your class when returning from Covid-19- information for teachers

(adapted by Dr Bianca Finger-Berry, Critical Incident Lead, from Psychological First Aid for schools – a field operations guide, National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

When classes resume, you may feel the need to return to academic learning quickly.

However, to best promote long-term recovery and to help students return to their pre-crisis ability to concentrate and function academically, be sure to talk to them about the recovery process and address any safety concerns. You may want to modify the classroom curriculum temporarily, take extra time to cover certain material, or postpone possibly distressing subject matter. Below are suggestions:

Contact and Engagement

Take the Initiative: Students may withdraw or have other difficulties recovering from the crisis and fail to seek help. Actively reach out to students, especially those you have a good relationship with. If they aren't willing to talk with you, seek out another staff member who may be able to help. Speak in private if you can and be discreet.

Seek Consultation: It is impossible to prepare for every scenario that may occur or every concern students may have. Consult with colleagues in school and other professionals and call upon their expertise.

Safety and Comfort

Reassure Students: In the days and weeks to follow students may continue to show signs of emotional distress or concern. Reassure them that they can come to you with such concerns and/or inform them of the procedures in place to get help.

Report Safety Concerns: Be alert to rumours and report these to senior staff as appropriate.

Help Manage Grief: If a student is struggling with the death of a family member, friend or other loved one, provide appropriate emotional support. After identifying the needs of the student, find out about support available and modify academic assignments as needed.

Provide Information about the Event: Consider these guidelines when talking with students:

- Be truthful and share information in a developmentally appropriate way.
- Provide a timeline of upcoming school activities.
- Work with the students in planning memorial tributes or displays if a member of the school community has died.
Encourage students to participate in prosocial service activities (volunteer days, fund raising events).



Stabilization

Stabilize the School Environment: Calmly convey to your students that the staff and leadership team are continuing to monitor the situation and will attempt to address any concerns they might have. Students are often anxious when facing trauma-related chaos, changes, and transitions. Providing them with a calm, supportive environment with clear rules and expectations will help them regain a sense of security and normality.

Identify Possible Reminders: Take steps, to the extent possible, to eliminate potential reminders in your classroom that may cause distress. If a student does become reactive, calmly provide emotional support or refer him/her to the school support system.

Information Gathering

Know Common Signs of Distress: Watch and listen for any students who show signs of distress or changes in behaviour and refer them to the appropriate professionals. Signs of distress vary by age and developmental level and can include:

- Poor control of emotions
- Anger and moodiness
- Frustration and anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Change in academic performance or in attendance
- Trouble with concentration, memory, cognition, and organization
- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomachs
- Risk-taking, unpredictable, and/or impulsive behaviour
- Intense reactions to reminders of the event

Identify Students Needing Services: If you see changes in a student, ask directly how he/she is doing. Many students will not tell someone they are having difficulty until they are directly asked. Also ask the student if he/she knows of any classmates who may need help. They are often aware of changes in their peers.

Practical Assistance

Identify Students with Resource Needs: Help to identify students' needs, such as school supplies, or uniforms.

Help Families: You may be able to help students' families with their needs and concerns by directing them to appropriate support staff and resources. Reassure them of the steps the school is taking to promote recovery. Use a part of staff meetings to discuss some of these needs and concerns so that the leadership team can problem-solve ways how to address them (e.g., identify additional community resources, use of donation funds).



Connection with Social Supports

Increase In-Class Interaction: You will want to encourage interaction among students to facilitate social support. Increase the number of group activities and collaborative assignments. Encourage reconnection with family, friends, and members of their faith communities. Provide information about upcoming community events, add precautions if you are concerned that some students may not be ready for some events (e.g., memorials).

Information on Coping

Address Concerns: Schedule time with students to listen to their concerns about what happened. Correct misconceptions they may have about recovery. Schedule this discussion early in the day and when there is enough time to address all concerns.

Maintain Structure: Help students' recovery by keeping to the regular classroom structure as best you can. Students benefit from predictability and consistency. When children need to change teachers and/or classrooms, make the new setting as similar as possible to the previous one. If this is not possible, discuss the losses and changes as a group.

Provide Support: Students may exhibit more defiant, hyperactive, and/or distractive behaviours in your classroom. Remain calm and provide clear instructions of the behaviour you expect. Praise students for appropriate, on-task behaviour and for using effective coping skills. To assist students to be more organised, breakdown assignments into manageable parts and encourage them to write them in their planners.

Link with Collaborative Services

Provide Information on Available Services: All families, students, and staff need to know the location of school and community services and the steps required to access these services. If you are unsure of the appropriate and available resources, refer the individual in need to support staff who have that information. Have psychoeducational and informational materials available for parents in order to address their questions.

Follow up on Recommendations: Check in with students and parents to make sure that they are getting the services or resources you have recommended. If not, review the plan and adjust it accordingly. In the days and weeks to follow the school will play a vital role in the recovery of the students and the school community. You serve as the primary contact person for students throughout the course of the day by watching out for the welfare of students, identifying those who are struggling and getting them help, and providing updated and accurate information which you obtain through staff meetings and from the school leadership team. By utilising the suggestions in this handout, you can help students recover and succeed academically, psychologically, and socially. These strategies can also help you and your family. Most importantly, don't forget to take care of yourself during these stressful times.