



NATIONAL CENTER
FOR SCHOOL CRISIS
AND BEREAVEMENT

When School Starts Back: Helping students and yourself cope with crisis during a pandemic



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Outline

- Psychological first aid
- Common reactions to a crisis
- What we might expect when schools re-open
- Helping children cope with the pandemic
- Professional self-care

Psychological First Aid

- Provide broadly to those impacted
- Supportive services to promote normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
- All adults should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope



Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress.

PFA Actions

source: American Red Cross

Observation or
Awareness

Make a
Connection

Help People Feel
Comfortable and
at Ease

Be Kind, Calm, &
Compassionate

Assist with
Basic Needs

Listen

Give Realistic
Reassurance

Encourage
Good Coping

Help People
Connect

Give Accurate
and Timely
Information

Suggest a
Referral
Resource

End the
Conversation

Watch your media consumption

- Make sure it is a healthy diet; don't consume too much
- Keep informed through focused/periodic attention to trusted sources of information
- If you aren't getting reassured or learning practical actions to take, then disconnect from media
- Limit amount of media exposure – this is a good time to unplug and connect instead with children and family

Potential Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions

Fears & Anxiety;
School
Avoidance

Sleep problems;
Change in
Appetite

Difficulties with
Concentration &
Academic
Performance

Sadness &
Depression

Anger &
Irritability;
Distrust &
Suspiciousness

Alcohol & Other
Substance Use

Physical
Symptoms

Grief

Guilt

Effects of the World Trade Center Attack on NYC Public School Students

- 6 months after 9-11-01
- Applied Research and Consulting, LLC, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and NY State Psychiatric Institute
- Over 8,000 students grades 4-12
- Self-reports of current mental health problems and impairment in functioning
- “Probable psychiatric disorder” if reported symptoms consistent with diagnostic criteria AND impairment in functioning

Prevalence of probable psychiatric disorders

- One of four met criteria for one or more of probable psychiatric disorders
- Approximately one out of ten had: PTSD (11%), major depressive disorder (8%), separation anxiety disorder (12%), and panic attacks (9%)
- 15% had agoraphobia

Adjustment problems nearly universal

- 87% reported PTSD symptom 6 months later
 - 76% often thinking about attack
 - 45% trying to avoid thinking, hearing, or talking about it
 - 25% harder to keep mind on things
 - 24% problems sleeping
 - 17% nightmares
 - 18% stopped going to places or doing things that reminded them
 - 11% at least 6 symptoms → probable PTSD
- 2/3 had not sought any mental health services

Talking with and supporting children

- Don't pretend everything is OK – children pick up when parents/adults are not genuine and honest
- Children may pick up on concerns primarily of adults
- Provide appropriate reassurance, but don't give false reassurance
- Find out individual child's fears, concerns, skepticism
- Don't tell children that they shouldn't be worried; help them learn to deal with their uncertainty and fear
- Include positive information; present a hopeful perspective

Strategies for dealing with distress

- Reading or hobbies that promote healthy distraction
- Journaling, blogging, art, music to promote expressions of feelings
- Exercise, yoga
- Appropriate use of respectful humor
- Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, self-hypnosis and guided imagery
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Help children identify steps they can take personally to protect their own health and to help others

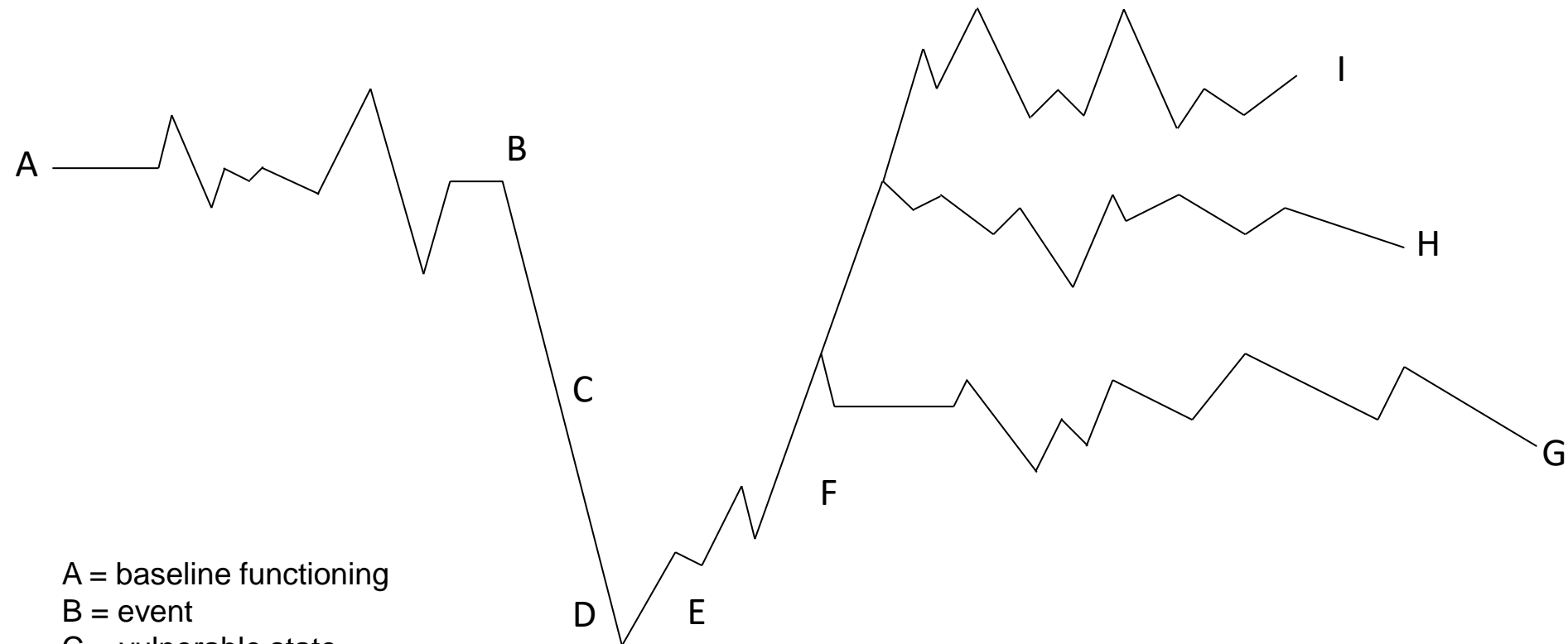
Some children may need more assistance

- The pandemic and discussion about the impact on families may remind children of other difficulties – events in the past, ongoing challenges, or concerns about future losses or crises
- Children who were anxious or depressed before the pandemic will likely need more support
- Children may need to focus first on their own needs before they are able to think of needs of others; try not to make them feel guilty for thinking about how this crisis impacts them personally

What you are doing is of value

- Just because we don't know everything, doesn't mean we know nothing of value
- You know strategies that have helped in the past to decrease distress – try them now
- Reach out to colleagues/resources in school district and community when more is critically needed
- Celebrate positive contributions you make
- Set reasonable expectations
- The curriculum has changed – teaching children how to cope → helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient

Adjustment Over Time in Crisis



A = baseline functioning

B = event

C = vulnerable state

D = usual coping mechanisms fail

E = helplessness, hopelessness

F = improved functioning

G = continued impairment

H = return to baseline

I = post-traumatic growth

Compassion fatigue

- Exposure to trauma and suffering of others can lead to compassion fatigue
 - Empathy: understanding and taking perspective of another
 - Compassion: requires empathy but includes wanting to help and/or desiring to relieve suffering – “to bear or suffer together”
- Warnings about compassion fatigue imply that compassion is necessarily tiring
- Compassionate approaches can be gratifying and bring meaning to the work

Supporting those in need can be gratifying

- Realistic objectives of purpose of interactions
- Have skills and resources to provide meaningful assistance
- Are aware of and have sufficient support to deal with personal impact of work
- Especially difficult during a pandemic when you have other challenges
 - Set prioritizes – aim to accomplish those on top of list; eliminate some lower on list
 - Go out of order some of the time
 - Find ways to take care of yourself

Challenges to self-care

- Allocating time when there is so much to do and everyone needs your help
- Feeling shame or guilt for attending to your own needs
- Assuming others are having less trouble adjusting
- Lack of modeling of professional self-care

Challenges for leadership after a crisis

- No matter what you do, or how well you do it, you won't be able to make everything ok
- Those impacted by a crisis often react to feeling out of control by trying to exert more control
- People will have very different views about what should be done and feel strongly about those views
 - Safety
 - Timeline for returning to academic focus
 - Commemoration and memorialization
 - Use of funds
- Reactions can challenge working relationships
- You can't stop and focus just on recovery

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Dedicated to helping schools support their students
through crisis and loss

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