

When tragedy hits a school

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Ten years ago, hundreds of Pinellas Park High School students saw their assistant principal gunned down by one of their fellow students.

Eight years ago, several Tarpon Springs high school students witnessed a head-on collision involving students from their school. Not knowing their friends were already dead, the students vainly tried to resuscitate them.

Several months ago, a bus load of middle school students saw a man run over and killed by a delivery truck.

On Monday, students at Lakewood High School arrived knowing that one of their own was not there. During the weekend, she had been shot and killed by her boyfriend.

In each of these incidents, the Pinellas County school system mobilized its Crisis Response Team to help students, teachers and parents deal with their emotional reactions to violent death.

"Grief takes all kinds of forms and occurs in different stages," said Jim Montgomery, supervisor of guidance for the school system. "Basically what we do is help people talk about their feelings. It can be exhausting work."

Montgomery is one of four people on call to all schools 24 hours a day, seven days a week, ready to send additional social workers, psychologists and even hospice counselors to help schools deal with the aftermath of a traumatic event.

"We are there to help. Any school can call us at home, nights or weekends," said Nancy Crosby, supervisor of school social workers. Lakewood's principal called her last weekend to coordinate a response to the shooting death of 16-year-old Shinequa LaTasha Walker.

"The school already had a plan in place to send any students who were upset to the media center for counseling," Crosby said.

In fact, each school in Pinellas County is required to have a crisis response plan - not only to react to violent deaths, but to any traumatic event that can affect students or the faculty.

"When a teacher had a heart attack in class at Osceola High School, the kids were okay, but the faculty was not," said Montgomery. "I talked to one physical education teacher for more than an hour because he was so emotional. We even had a group session to talk to teachers about their feelings."

Those feelings can be immediate, and they can last for some time after the triggering event. When two East Lake High School boys were killed in an automobile accident over Christmas break, Montgomery did not anticipate the emotional reaction when the school reopened.

"There were more than 200 kids who were still really upset," Montgomery said. "We put a lot of people in there to talk to the kids in their classes about what had happened. We just let them work their way through it."

He clearly remembers the Pinellas Park High School incident in which assistant principal Richard Allen was shot in the head by a student. Allen died several days later.

"I spent a week at Pinellas Park. It was really traumatic. We talked to students, teachers, parents. And it was amazing how other things bothering people came out," he said.

One girl walked up to Montgomery and told him, "By the way, I'm pregnant." A mother who had attended an evening meeting for parents thanked him for helping her son through his grief, then calmly announced, "I'm going to commit suicide tonight."

Montgomery stayed to talk with her for hours. The mother did not commit suicide. "Traumatic events can trigger all sorts of feelings - it brings up a lot of other stuff that we have to deal with."

Stacy Mariani, a school social worker, was part of a crisis response team assigned to Gibbs High School after a student there was killed recently in a car accident.

"We set up a counseling center in the school media center. When a teacher found a student upset or crying, they would send them to us. We try to offer solace and support and some real tools to help them handle the grieving process. It often is the first time in a student's life that they experience these emotions," Mariani said.

He and other grief counselors tell students that what they are feeling is normal. They help students and faculty to talk about the deceased, to memorialize them through letters, poems or just memories. Students often learn for the first time about wakes and funeral ceremonies.

"Twenty-plus years ago, a lot of the signals of grieving would go unnoticed. There was an impulse to minimize bad news and expect students and teachers to find outside support systems. Then we (school systems) started to realize that it was not good to turn a blind eye on traumatic events," Mariani said.

These traumatic events seem to be increasing every year, Mariani said.

"It's a reflection of our increasingly violent society."

How parents can help

A fellow student has died. Or a teacher. Parents can help their children deal with the resulting confusion, fear, anger and grief. Here are some suggestions, according to the Pinellas County School System's Crisis Response Handbook:

Set aside time to talk to your child as soon as possible after the death.

Give your child the facts in a simple manner, avoiding too much detail. Additional information can be given as children ask specific questions.

Use the terms "dead" or "died"; avoid phrases such as "he's sleeping," "God took her" or "He went away."

Explain your feelings to your child and, if you cry, it is good to let your child see your sadness. Give them permission to cry as well.

Read a book about death to your child.

Talk about the wake and funeral, explain the ceremonies and find out if your child wants to attend.

Suggest ways your child can say "goodbye," such as writing a letter or poem in honor of the person who has died.

Watch for behavioral changes in your child and call for help if they concern you.

Understand that disruption of sleep and daily activities, as well as loss of appetite, are normal responses to an abnormal or traumatic event.

Support your children through the grieving process by keeping their lives fairly structured.

Make adjustments for fears, especially at bedtime.

Long-term grief

Traumatic events can produce a range of stresses among both children and adults - from the normal grieving process to more severe psychological reactions.

If the following signs of grief, considered normal immediately after a trauma, are experienced longer than a month after the event, the American Psychological Association says professional mental health assistance should be considered:

Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.

Trouble sleeping or a change in appetite.

Feelings of anxiety or fear, especially during events or situations that are reminiscent of the original trauma.

Being on edge, easily startled or becoming overly alert.

Feeling depressed, sad and having low energy.

Memory problems, including aspects of the trauma.

Feeling "scattered," unable to focus on work or daily activities, or difficulty making decisions.

Feeling irritable, easily agitated, angry or resentful.

Feeling emotionally "numb," withdrawn, disconnected or different from others.

Spontaneously crying, feeling despair or hopelessness.

Feeling extremely protective, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.

Unable to face certain aspects of the trauma or avoiding certain activities associated with the trauma.

Coping tips

Insomnia, flashbacks, fear, guilt, anger, depression - these are all normal reactions to traumatic events at the beginning of the grieving process.

During this process, students, teachers, parents or anyone touched by a traumatic event can do a number of things to cope, according to the Pinellas County School System. Here are some of their suggestions:

Within the first two days of the traumatic event, alternate strenuous physical exercise with periods of relaxation to alleviate some of the physical reactions of grief.

Recognize you are having normal reactions. Reach out to talk to people and share your feelings. Give yourself permission to feel bad. Realize that those around you are probably under stress, too.

Try to keep busy, keeping your life structured and as close to normal as possible. Don't make any big life changes, but do make as many small decisions as possible to regain a feeling of control over your life.

- SHEILA MULLANE ESTRADA

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