

## Tips for School Counselors in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

You already come to this with a terrific set of skills and ideas. But we also know that the adjustment on all sides for families displaced by the hurricane will be significant and will bring with it some unusual and unexpected challenges.

Psychological trauma creates a whole host of symptoms over which people have little or no control. Understanding trauma will help guide our support for students and parents.

**The biochemistry:** It is helpful to understand how traumatic memories are different than other kinds of memories. When someone's life is in danger or when one sees something terrifying, the brain gives signals to release great amounts of adrenaline and a whole host of other biochemical mobilizers. The emotional sensation that accompanies this adrenaline release is fear. The cognitive reaction to that release is heightened sensory awareness (clearer vision, more alert). The physical reaction is greatly heightened physical energy and stamina. Initially, most people have a warped sense of time, often have confused thoughts, and later may not remember many major aspects of the incident. The presence of increased adrenaline and other physiological changes keep people in hyper-arousal, and for some, that can create a self-feeding loop of anxiety, agitation, irritability, aggression and acting out.

It will be important to provide **several levels of support:**

- Teachers will benefit from a rudimentary understanding of trauma, enough that they can adapt their classroom strategies and feel some success. Create times for them to meet -- at least informally -- to share ideas and common support.
- Displaced students will benefit from opportunities to meet together in structured groups that address adjustment issues and give ideas for coping skills. Their support of each other will be something that students who didn't survive this can't give.
- Consider having buddies to welcome the displaced children -- students who have been in that building the year before and know where things are, and maybe have some good social connections into which they could integrate the new students.
- It will be really helpful to provide many avenues for gaining trust in the school and feeling a sense of belonging. This can be addressed through classroom activities, carefully planned assemblies, having t-shirts and other wearable items that represent the school, collaborative murals... the list is endless in terms of possibilities. It will be helpful for counselors to share ideas with each other.
- You will work with such dedication that it will be easy for you to forget your own needs around self-care! You can't help others unless you have reserves and energy to give!
- Administrators may turn much of this over to you. Keep them in the loop -- help them understand what the family's needs are, and give them ideas you think will help.

Over time, these children will benefit **from focused trauma intervention**. Traditional counseling techniques that focus on emotions and feelings are often counter-productive, as it takes the student back into feeling powerless, helpless and overwhelmed. It is often much more helpful to stay quite cognitive in your work with them. Left-brained activities, such as making lists, describing actions rather than feelings, doing math -- those activities



that engage the left brain often provide relief. The right brain is highly involved in flashbacks and hyper arousal, so helping traumatized people "stay" in the left brain is often a much more helpful approach.

When people experience trauma, they are often unable to be around others who are emotional without being triggered. Those students who survived the hurricane but did not lose a loved one may be better served in small groups separate from those who both endured the hurricane and lost a loved one. For instance, in the Safe Room after events in which some students had direct impact or witnessed the event and others are grieving the loss but not personally impacted by trauma, those who are traumatized often act out around those who are crying or grieving, because being around the emotions of grief sets off triggering of flashbacks and other disconcerting symptoms.

Encourage parents to limit exposure to television and media coverage of the event. We learned from the aftermath of 9/11 that those children who lived in Chinatown lost media coverage when the towers collapsed (because their broadcast signals were beamed from the Twin Towers) had far fewer nightmares and drew no pictures of people jumping from the towers. One of the greatest favors we can do, both for children and for adults, is to turn off the television and get whatever news coverage we need from radio and print media.

#### **Group Work With Children Displaced By The Hurricane:**

Take the following under consideration. These are not rules, but guidelines.

- Think about separating students by level of exposure. If some saw people die and had much more trauma than others, hearing the stories of abject suffering for those kids who didn't witness that will only add to the vividness of their fears and nightmares.
- Remember that keeping things more cognitive than emotional is often very helpful until they've had lots of time to stabilize and regain a sense of trust in the world. Initially, telling the story in order of what happened is more therapeutic than talking about how they felt when it happened.
- Normalizing reactions without using the word "normal" is helpful. "Not unusual" or "I've heard others say similar things" is more helpful than "That is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation." Nothing in their bodies, lives or psyches seems normal. Most will not return to anything that was normal; they'll be creating a new normal. Try using words other than "normal" but focus on normalizing nightmares, flashbacks, frozen pictures of what happened, anxieties about rain and wind... etc..
- Have a structure to the group time that they come to expect -- a check in, an activity, some discussion, and a clear closure that provides hope and positive expectation.

More guidelines will be available regularly as the unique needs of this special group become apparent. Perhaps most important for the children, and indeed for all of us, is to have periods of reprieve when we laugh and play and dance and sing and give ourselves a break from it all. Your schools are lucky to have you.

