School counselor interns and new school counselors should focus on safety, role, skills and resources to manage those everyday crises occurring in schools.
Chances are you’ll never face the trauma and terror experienced in Newtown that day. Yet you probably deal with “common crises” every day. For new school counselors or school counselor interns, these everyday crises may cause stress, anxiety, uncertainty and doubt. In working with school-counselors-in-training, I often hear the stories of common crisis during our supervision sessions, and I also hear their fear and self-doubt about how they managed the situation.

“The parent was screaming in another school counselor’s face and…”

“The student punched his fist through the door; glass flew everywhere and…”

“The student was obviously drunk or high and…”

“Then the mom smacked her son right in front of me and…”

“She pulled up her sleeve and had fresh cuts all over her arms and…”

I’ve heard all of these statements, and others like them, from my school counseling students. They always end with the same six words: “I didn’t know what to do.” As their instructor, I know these students have been trained throughout the program to manage difficult situations. However in moments of panic or uncertainty, some school counselor interns lose sight of how they are trained to help.

Crisis and emergency management are covered in several courses, and it is also a discussion topic during internship. I ask students to research any crisis and emergency management plans in place at their site and report back to class. Some interns are surprised to learn some schools don’t have formal plans beyond fire and emergency evacuation drills. During the discussion, a slight panic ensues among students as to what they would do if they were at a site without a plan during a crisis. Although I certainly advocate for emergency planning, preparation and training in all schools, I also emphasize to my students that they possess skills to manage many individual, common crises that may arise.

In a critical emergency or tense situation, new school counselors and interns may second guess their skills more than experienced school counselors. Despite all of their training and education, information they learned in a didactic setting as opposed to a clinical setting may be temporarily misplaced when confronted with a difficult, challenging, dangerous or even uncomfortable situation.

I give my students an easy mnemonic device – SRSR – to help them focus when faced with challenges on site. SRSR stands for safety, role, skills and resources.

BY HEATHER C. ROBERTSON, PH.D.
SAFETY

Assessing safety is the first step to take when faced with new, uncertain or potentially dangerous situations. You should assess the safety of the individual you’re working with as well as your personal safety and that of others. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is this person in danger of hurting him- or herself or someone else?
- Does the person need medical attention?
- Are other people in danger or in need of attention?
- Am I safe? Do I feel safe in this situation?
- Do I need assistance to maintain a safe environment?
- Do I need to notify others about this situation for safety purposes?

There are many factors to consider when assessing for safety, but it is important to remember to assess for safety before beginning to counsel a student or even going to get help. If you have adequately assessed the situation to the best of your ability, you will be better able to report to others (e.g. school security, protective services, administration) if additional supports are needed. This assessment will also be helpful if you need to document or report the situation.

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ROLE

Next, determine if the situation is within the scope of a school counselor’s role. This reminder is in no way intended to promote the “it’s not my job” philosophy but to remind you to only act within your professional competence. School counselor interns should not attempt to resolve issues beyond their scope of professional practice. School counselors may find themselves addressing issues involving substance abuse, parenting, marital relationships or other specialties that may be beyond their role and competence. Be certain any action you take while working with students, parents or school personnel is always within the professional role of a school counselor. A student using drugs during school may need services from a substance abuse counselor, school social worker or even medical personnel. Don’t try to take on the roles of others, such as a dean or principal. Interns sometimes make the mistake of thinking they can and should help all students with all problems. Competent school counselors assess each situation and respond within their professional role and ethical competence.

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Finally, use the wealth of resources you have at your disposal. Beyond your own skills, there are several professional resources located within the school, such as the school counseling supervisor, teachers, other school counselors, administrators, school security, social workers, nurses and psychologists. When appropriate, and within the limits of school policy, you can also use community resources, such as calling child protective services, 911, medical personnel, fire departments and law enforcement.

One of the greatest resources school counselor interns and new hires have is their initiative to ask questions and research crisis/emergency policies when they begin their internship or job. You can ask questions about previous emergency situations and how they were managed. You can inquire about any potential emergency issues that may be common in the school, such as self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, on-campus drug use or fighting. Once you have an understanding of which potential issues may arise, ask questions about how the issue has been or would be addressed. Also research the issue or perhaps focus on that issue for an assignment in one of your graduate courses.

Finally, if you encounter a traumatic event or crisis on campus, such as the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, a valuable resource is to assess and evaluate your own response to that issue as well as the school’s response. We can learn a great deal about how to manage crisis by studying the impact of other crisis situations. By studying the events of Columbine High School in 1999; Sept. 11, 2001; and Virginia Tech in 2007, we changed how we respond to threats in schools, colleges and our nation. Thus, if and when an emergency situation occurs in a school setting, all school personnel should come together to evaluate how well they responded to the situation, including both the strengths and areas of improvement.

SKILLS

New school counselors and school counselor interns have mastered a variety of counseling skills and techniques to draw upon in crisis situations. New school counselors are sometimes overwhelmed by the systems to be learned, such as attendance, electronic logs and transcripts. Because every school is different, interns are not often exposed to these systems in their graduate program until practicum or internship. Interns spend time learning the logistical and operational systems at one internship site, only to go to a second internship site the following semester and learn another system. School counselor interns may tend to focus on what they don’t know (e.g. operational and logistical systems), which can occasionally cloud both their confidence and their memory of the many skills they possess.

Draw upon your most basic counseling skills, such as attending (i.e. open body language, reading nonverbal cues), active listening and probing when faced with challenging situations. You can diffuse upset parents by making sure they feel heard, which you can do through listening, reflecting feeling, paraphrasing and summarization. You may also use more advanced skills, such as assessing for lethality, redirecting and gently confronting individual students or parents depending on the situation. Sometimes, you can help by safely removing one of the agitated members and talking to him or her apart from the conflict. In these cases, you’ll use your full range of counseling skills, while simultaneously helping provide order to a challenging or chaotic situation.
Although it is prudent to prepare for these events, it is equally important to manage the common crises school counselors face every day in the schools. Seasoned school counselors seem to manage these crises calmly and confidently. For the newly hired school counselors or school counselor interns, who may not be quite as calm, focusing on SRSR may help them develop the confidence they need.

Heather C. Robertson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at St. John’s University in Queens, N.Y. She can be reached at robertsh@stjohns.edu.
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COUNSELING FOR CAREER CHOICE ACT INTRODUCED

ASCA applauds Sen. Mark Begich (D-AK) for introducing the Counseling for Career Choice Act. The bill, S. 282, introduced on Feb. 12, 2013, would provide states funds to create or expand their comprehensive school counseling framework that includes guidance from local school districts, post-secondary schools and programs, and local business and industry.

“This legislation demonstrates Sen. Begich’s commitment to increase comprehensive school counseling services in the states and would provide students with post-secondary planning that would meet their needs more effectively,” said Richard Wong, Ed.D., ASCA executive director.

States receiving funding under the bill may, in turn, make grants to local school districts or education agencies. Funding can be used to:

• Create quality professional development opportunities for school counselors
• Create statewide systems for providing students with current workforce information
• Establish, improve or coordinate post-secondary opportunities for students
• Hire additional school counselors

For more information, contact Amanda Fitzgerald, afitzgerald@schoolcounselor.org.

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