

School Response Kit

THE FIRST DAYS AFTER DISASTER

Dear Colleagues,
Our region has experienced very difficult moments over the last few weeks due to Hurricane Harvey. Our students may have felt fear and incurred trauma as a result of living through the storms, being a flood victim, or simply experiencing the stress of the situation. This resource kit is designed for educators to respond to students during the first days after a disaster.

Normative Reactions to Traumatic Events

- Decreased emotional regulation
- Increased anger, irritability, or frustration
- Anxiety, fear about death or future events
- Sadness, grief, and sorrow
- Social withdrawal or loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Change in academic performance or in attendance
- Trouble with concentration, memory, cognition, and organization
- Physical symptoms due to stress, e.g. headaches, gastrointestinal discomfort, muscle tension and soreness
- Risk-taking, unpredictable, and/or impulsive behavior
- Intense reactions to reminders of the event
- Nightmares
- Continued discussion of the event
- Homelessness, displaced at shelter or other housing
- Physical ailments as a direct result of disaster
- Lack of school supplies, disheveled appearance

How to Respond to Distress

Take care of yourself: Be sure you are in a calm, relaxed state of mind before providing support to others. Otherwise, seek help for yourself and refer students to available supports. The Employee Assistance Program can assist employees with finding housing/shelter and transportation, processing information related to filing claims, accessing FEMA and similar resources, and receiving counseling services. To access the program, employees can visit mylifevalues.com

Username: HISD - Password: EAP

You can also call 1-855-574-HISD (4473). Call centers will be functioning 24/7.

Set a calm and reassuring tone: Your calm presence provides a sense of security for others.

Assess the situation: Determine what kind of support and services students require (medical, housing, basic needs, crisis intervention, emotional support) and manage or refer appropriately to administrator, nurse, counselor, social worker.

Understand stress and trauma takes many forms: Recovery occurs in stages over weeks and months. Don't become discouraged because some students take more time than others or have temporary setbacks. Refrain from judging students' coping mechanisms.

Communicate: Be open to talking with students about their reactions and experiences. Listen empathically, and do not feel compelled to fill every silent moment with words or explanations. Do not urge them to share details. This is not therapy. Normalize feelings, and let students know their reactions are normal and expected. You may say, "Thanks for telling us you experienced fear. Did anyone else experience fear?" Provide them with accurate and factual information to help clarify misunderstandings and dispel frightening and exaggerated rumors. End disaster-related conversations with safety procedures and restating the commitment to student safety.

Stress- and Trauma-Relief Activities

Targeted activities help students express and release stress and trauma in a constructive way. Reactions that are not expressed through words or supportive activities may manifest in negative behaviors and harmful, internalized thoughts. Below is a finite list of activities educators may engage student in.

- Mindful breathing and guided relaxation may be practiced for a few minutes at the beginning of the school day/class, or throughout the day, to prepare students mentally and emotionally for a day of academics
- Drawing and coloring

- Playing games
- Singing together
- Journaling and story writing
- Sharing stories of overcoming challenges, resiliency, and gratitude
- Playing relaxing music
- Encouraging students to perform simple acts of kindness
- Providing opportunities for students to share their own strategies that relieve stress
- Calmly discussinh safety protocols and best practices in the event of a disaster

What Principals Can Do

- Reach out to students, families and staff affected adversely by the disaster
- Openly acknowledge the disaster with students and highlight the school community's resiliency
- Provide regular updates (district communications, available services, clean-up/rebuilding efforts, safety concerns)
- Identify reminders of the disaster on campus and limit or eliminate them as much as possible
- Allow counselors/designated staff to attend trauma training and share techniques with staff
- Promote your campus as an environment for recovery
- Continue encouraging students to meet high academic standards

What Teachers Can Do

- Share information in a developmentally appropriate way and reiterate ensuring safety
- Discourage discussion of gruesome events and encourage sharing of reactions instead
- Be mindful of teacher conversations regarding the disaster in the presence of students and/or limit conversation
- Accommodate lessons to integrate elements of the disaster in an educational way
- Encourage students to participate in pro-social activities such as community service and random acts of kinds

Monitor changes in students and manage or refer out. Consult with other teachers regarding student changes

- Assess the class energy from time to time and make space to engage in stress-relief activities for a few minutes when necessary
- Set limits to negative behaviors and conversations not helpful to the overall healing
- Welcome and integrate students that may have had to relocate due to the disaster
- Utilize music as a means of setting a calm tone and inhibiting auditory triggers

What Counselors Can Do

- Reach out to students, families and staff affected adversely by the disaster
- Identify vulnerable students and staff and work as a team to find appropriate wrap-around services
- Be aware of trends such as self-harm, high-risk behaviors
- Avoid engaging in counseling services with students related to trauma prior to a month after the event, as to not cause undue harm
- Develop a referral system for staff members to refer students to you
- Meet with students in immediate distress and those overwhelmed by a sense of loss
- Provide psycho-education to staff on identifying and providing interventions for trauma, model interventions and visit classrooms to continue assessing needs
- Provide opportunities to parents to meet with you and provide information on common signs of distress, interventions and resources
- Establish social-connectedness via the crisis intervention activities, volunteering opportunities, student and/or staff groups, campus projects
- Be knowledgeable of the psychological reactions to disaster and trauma. Consult with HISD Crisis Intervention at 713-923-8597

Sources:

Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Natural Disaster- National Institute of Mental Health

Helping Children after a Natural Disaster- National Association of School Psychologists

Psychological First Aid for Schools: Field Operations Guide- National Child Traumatic Stress Network- National Child Traumatic Stress Network

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