

When Tragedy Strikes: Helping Students Cope

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A violent mass murder, such as at the Pittsburgh synagogue, can affect an entire school community. People feel shock, disbelief, and sorrow. Parents and teachers want to be helpful to students but also have to manage their own reactions. They can worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect approach, here are four points that can help.

1. Don't over-assume what the tragedy means to students. Adults often think, "If I'm this upset the kids must be even more upset." This is by no means always true. Children and adolescents react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their age, their own personality, and so on. Some may be very upset, others not. Some may have many questions, others none. Showing little reaction does *not* necessarily mean a student is hiding his or her feelings.

2. Young people of all ages are remarkably resilient. Some may become quite upset at first, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually recover. It almost never helps to keep asking them extensive, probing questions. It does help to respond to their questions, to listen when they want to talk, and to give them simple, direct information.

3. If you receive a difficult question and you're not sure how to answer, it is not usually helpful to invent something. You can say, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Their response will make it easier for you to answer.

4. You needn't be perfect. There may be questions you can't answer. It is OK to say, "I don't know," and to ask, "What have you heard?" or "Did you have an idea about that?" Sometimes, being honest with students will cause adults to become emotional. If you should become sad or even tearful when talking with students, this is alright. It doesn't hurt students to know that adults care deeply about losses and tragedies.

In the end, adults will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and students—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—just being with the kids, just being available to them, listening to them, sharing with them—can really help them cope.

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