

Help your students cope with their feelings about hate and violence

School staff are often called upon to help students deal with stress in a supportive and compassionate way. Adults need to help students feel safe at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place. Educators and other school staff can help students understand current events factually, how events do or do not impact their lives and how to handle their emotional reactions.

Students are likely to be affected in some way by news reports of the tragedy in New Zealand. For many, the guidance of caring adults will make the difference between developing emotional and psychological coping skills, rather than being overwhelmed.

Avoid engaging in political discussions or taking sides. Recognize that students may receive many different messages at home or from friends about the situation. The best way to help students is to use your good judgement and empathy. To provide additional support, here are suggestions from our social work staff to help you understand what students may be experiencing and to respond in ways that support them.

Take care of your own feelings and needs

- As adults, we have our own fears and anxieties. It's important not to let these reactions get in the way of listening to students or to "take over" the classroom. Students need to feel that adults are calm and in control.
- It's important to acknowledge and cope with your own natural feelings. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. Make sure to connect with other adults to meet your emotional needs. Teacher meetings and/or support networks can fill this role. If you recognize your own feelings and cope well, you will be better able to be supportive with your students.
- Ask for help. Social workers and psychologists are available to the school. Consult with your principal if you wish to speak with someone.

Help students feel personally safe

- Be calm, and reassure students that your school is a safe place. Engage them in discussions about how it is safe.
- Avoid in-class viewing of news coverage, especially in elementary schools. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between images on TV and their own personal reality. Even for older children, limiting exposure to news coverage can protect them from focusing too much on the crisis.
- As students express their fears and concerns, respond in the most reassuring way possible. For example, if a student asks, "What if we are attacked?" you could answer: "These incidents are extremely rare. Our government and our schools are doing everything they can to ensure our safety."

- Use this as an opportune time to discuss conflict resolution ideas and non-violent ways of solving problems.

Acknowledge and normalize students' feelings

- Emotional responses vary in nature and intensity from student to student. Feelings they may experience include fear, loss of control, anger, loss of stability, isolation and confusion.
- Accept students' feelings. Allow them to express their feelings – they are not good or bad, right or wrong, they're just there. Avoid being judgmental. Emphasize that each person is entitled to his or her own feelings and opinions unless it is hurting someone else. It's important that students have an opportunity to express their concerns and to feel that adults are taking those concerns seriously.
- Let them know that their feelings are normal and expected and that many others are feeling the same way.
- Try to recognize the feelings underlying students' actions and put them into words. For example, "I can see you are feeling scared about this."
- Encourage students to talk to you or another caring adult. Emphasize that you are there to help, and that they should let an adult know if they or a friend feels overwhelmed.
- Respect your students' individual responses. Some teens prefer to talk to adults – like parents or teachers – while others prefer to talk to friends.
- Some people respond to stress with humour, some of which may be inappropriate or insensitive. This type of humour should not be encouraged or condoned. However, if this does occur, speak after class with the student who made the joke to make sure he or she understands why the humour was inappropriate.

Help students appreciate diversity

- Help students appreciate the diversity in Canada, and to respect differences in ethnicity, language, religion and culture.
- Be particularly vigilant for any signs of reprisals against any students based on their race, country of origin, language or faith. This behaviour will not be tolerated. Report any incidents immediately to your principal.
- See the resource entitled "Maintaining safe and respectful environments during unsettling times" for more tips.

Be a good listener and observer

- When students ask questions, listen carefully to what they are saying and respond appropriately, as objectively as possible.
- Let the students guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need.
- Be prepared to answer students' questions factually. Stick to the facts—don't speculate about what could happen. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say so.

- Discuss events in age-appropriate terms, sharing information that is appropriate to the students' age and developmental level.
- There may be a need for ongoing discussions in the days to come. Acknowledge new events as information becomes available.
- Use this as an opportunity to discuss conflict resolution ideas and non-violent ways of solving problems.

Expect and respond to changes in behaviour

Children respond in different ways to stress and uncertainty. These could take the form of:

- preoccupation with violence, pretending to blow things up
- difficulty concentrating
- aggressive behaviour
- physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches
- increase in or loss of appetite
- anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
- sensitivity to loud noises
- mood changes
- sleep disturbances

Identify students who may be at risk

Most students will be able to cope with their concerns over current events, with the help of parents, teachers and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances.

The most vulnerable children are those who have:

- friends or relatives in the affected areas
- experienced a recent death in the family
- a history of depression, anxiety disorders or other trauma
- recently come from a country where they experienced armed conflict

Keep communication open between home and school

- Let parents know if a student is exhibiting stress at school. Give parents information about resources that are available at the school to help.