



Mental Health Tips for Schools After a Violent Event

By Ronald Lee, Psy.D., School Outreach Consultant

This has happened too many times. It's the morning after another school shooting and you need to reassure your workplace that it will be okay. In my career as a psychologist and education administrator, I have faced days like these in various school settings after a violent event occurs. The challenge is to hold, honor, and contain the collective emotions of a school community as they struggle with their loss of innocence. What follows are some tips for school leaders on how school communities can psychologically ground and re-focus their place of work following a high-exposure violent event.

- 1. Acknowledge your own feelings.** As a father, the husband of a teacher, and a community member, I personally have a strong reaction to violence towards children at school, especially very young children. It activates the protective papa bear in me. It is important to acknowledge those feelings of shock, anger and sadness - not set them aside. You are a human being with expected reactions. Rather than block that out, reflect on where you are in this moment and then let that perspective *fuel* your actions.
- 2. Reach out to those who you know will be triggered.** There are different ways that people are affected by a violent event, and some folks have more of an impact than others. Before you consider the majority of your teachers and staff, be mindful of those individuals who may need immediate attention and reach out to them. What teacher grade level teams or specialists may be most affected? Who recently had a loss? Who has been touched by violence of a similar nature in their past? Who may emotionally relate to this event by location, grade level, or even a social/family connection? Additionally, who may have recently given you concern about being potentially threatening to others, and/or may actually be inspired by recent events? If you don't have the time to check-in with these individuals personally, delegate some trusted co-workers who can.
- 3. Assemble your leadership and safety teams.** No one in your work setting can get centered unless your building administrators and safety teams are grounded. Your whole staff will look to you and your team for modeling and guidance. Give this group some space behind closed doors to vent, ruminate, and air out their feelings without filters. Listen to your security staff, mental health/counselors, and academic administrators about what they are most worried about. Then slowly get them stabilized enough to start making safety plans for the days ahead. Have your leader teams, mental health and counselors clear their schedules so they can be responsive to individuals who need extra support. Talk to your school co-leaders about the pros and cons of asking local law enforcement to provide extra presence at school for the days ahead (you ultimately want to reassure people, not alarm them).
- 4. Communicate with your whole staff, stakeholders, and provide resources.** Messaging to your staff and eventually your community of stakeholders in a timely manner during this time will be very important. Let them know that you share their reactions of shock, anger, and distress. Reassure them that for potential scenarios like these, you already have safety plans in place and you have practiced safety procedures at school. Give them resources both at school and the community for how they can access mental health support if and when they may need it. Remember to include your employees and families who are working from home. My agency at [CSSRC](http://www.colorado.gov/CSSRC) has posted on their public website several links to resources and guidance for adults on how to talk to children about violent events, reminders to limit media exposure, and practicing self-care. Parents and teachers appreciate tips on how to talk to their children about unimaginable events like these, especially if they are differentiated by age groups and developmental levels. Remember to connect with your non-English speaking families by supplementing your





communications with interpreters and translated versions. Provide teachers with scripts or choice phrases on how to respond to potential student questions and comments in class. Finally, remind your community of the need to be on the alert and the importance of reporting any suspicious activity in the days and weeks ahead.

5. **Review with your staff your current universal safety procedures.** These reminders should include visitor check-ins, the need to keep unsupervised external doors shut and locked, reporting suspicious items, persons or activities, and everyone's role in lockdown and secure perimeter procedures.
6. **Remind people that schools are still one of the safest places to be.** While the recent event was devastating news, schools remain one of the safest places to be. A recent [NYT article](#) reminds us that children are more likely to die from a car accident on the way to school or from a natural disaster, rather than from a school shooting. Urge stakeholders to keep these events in perspective. While they *could* happen, it is highly improbable that school shooting actually *will* happen.
7. **Practice self-care.** Some basic things will help us to get through trying times like these. Eat healthy meals, drink plenty of water, and keep a regular sleep routine. Limit watching news coverage of this event, reduce screen time in general, and avoid unhealthy activity like high caffeine intake or substance use. Meditate, exercise, and connect with supportive friends and family. And never go through this time alone! If you feel empowered to do so, contact your state or federal government representative, share what you feel about the recent event, and advocate for how this official can lessen the risk of the same kind of violent event occurring in your local schools.
8. **Review warning signs of threats and be on the alert for copy cats.** [Studies](#) show that following mass shootings, there is a heightened risk for copycat incidents in the 10-14 days that follow. Review your warning signs information, share it with your staff and community, and remind them about your reporting procedures (both during and after school office hours).
9. **Acknowledge the violent times we live in.** While we always want to be reassuring, especially at school, it's important to temper that positive outlook with the reality of the situation. The media, social network, and conversations with peers will bombard us with information (some true and some fiction) about the violent event that just occurred. While we want to reassure that it is highly improbable, we also need to acknowledge that violence *can* happen in every school. That is why we have safety plans and why we take the practice of safety procedures through drills and exercises very seriously.
10. **Read your school emotionally and consider the timing of the school year.** Given this point in time, your schools may be winding down from or completing an exhausting school year. So, your timing of how and when you do things may be tricky. It is said that during stressful times, it is easiest to keep doing the same things, harder to stop doing something, and hardest to try something new. Help get your community emotionally and psychologically regulated before you try to reason with them. If your staff and families continue to be in a state of distress over time, consider bringing in extra mental health professionals for additional guidance and support. Review your current school safety procedures. Reassure your community that you have structures and supports that make school a safe place to be. But save new procedures and new learning for a later time. There is a reason why schools tend to avoid staff professional development at the end of the school year. Help your community wind down this time with support and gentle reminders. Stay present, engaged, and save the major next steps for later when your staff are stabilized and refreshed to start anew.

