

Guidelines for Mental Health Professionals

Immediate Tasks for Mental Health Professionals

Mental health professionals play an active role following a traumatic event or disaster. Immediately after the event, keep in mind that the trauma affects not only the individuals directly involved, it also affects those who are in decision-making roles, those providing direct care, as well as the systems in which adults and children function. Mental health professional can provide services in a number of areas.

As a resource for community agencies, school personnel and parents, it is important to:

- Guide individuals and systems that are in decision-making roles regarding the most effective actions from a mental health point of view.
- Provide a structure and framework for teachers, parents and others caring for children.
- Assess the situation and the individuals affected.
- Implement direct communication and reunions, e.g. between school staff and administrators and parents and children.
- Provide and disseminate accurate information about the event, potential reactions and possible prevention strategies.
- Assist in the assessment and implementation of nuts and bolts pragmatic issues, e.g. transportation, food and shelter.

When providing direct mental health services, professionals should:

- Establish a triage system to identify children at greatest risk for mental health problems.
- Educate other professionals and caregivers of the groups most at risk for problems- those with physical or emotional proximity, prior mental health problems, poor support systems, previous trauma or death experiences and those with indirect exposure such as repetitive media coverage of the event.
- Establish a system to monitor the progress of children who exhibit stress reaction to observe whether the symptoms resolve or need intervention.
- Provide an atmosphere that encourages expression of feelings and teaches coping skills.
- Help teachers and parents distinguish “normal” from extreme reactions.
- Help teachers and parents recognize and accept regressive behaviors while encouraging more age-appropriate functioning.
- Provide support for parents, since the functioning of adults who care for bereaved and traumatized children has a powerful effect on the child’s ability to recover.

- Be aware of their own reaction to the disaster and the ways in which it might impact on their own functioning.

Ongoing Tasks for Mental Health Professionals

Research has shown that caregivers typically underestimate the intensity and duration of children's own reactions may interfere with their ability to accurately assess children's functioning or provide optimal care. Therefore it is especially important for mental health professionals to be aware of the importance of early intervention and to advocate for children who show symptoms that are acute (in the first months) and chronic (enduring for months and years) that go unrecognized and untreated. Mental health professional should:

- Screen children for identification of symptoms and severity of reaction.
- Provide thorough evaluation for the most severely affected children.
- Develop effective outreach systems to those in the community that are immediately affected and those less directly affected who are also at risk.
- Develop a referral system for those identified as needing care.
- Be familiar with the signs and symptoms of the most common reaction to trauma: posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and grief reactions.
- Understand the development and changes of symptoms over time and possible changes in diagnostic issues.
- Be aware of the special and complex reaction of children suffering from the effects of both trauma and death.
- Be sensitive to the difference of symptoms: children with internalizing symptoms are less likely to be identified while those with externalizing symptoms may be more often reported and may also have other co-existing problems.
- Be attuned to the possible re-traumatization that may occur on holidays, memorial events and media focus on the original event.
- Obtain appropriate training in trauma and grief-specific interventions and associated problems of depression and anxiety.
- Realize that ongoing treatment with a child dealing with PTSD may result in vicarious traumatization for the professional.
- Provide treatment and ongoing follow up to individuals.
- Educate other professionals and caregivers about the:
 - Long term consequences of unaddressed problems: school failure, acting out and antisocial behavior, chronic and more serious mental health problems.
 - Need for objective assessment and monitoring
 - Need to understand their own reaction and options for assistance
 - Complex nature of effectively helping children when under personal distress
- Maintain ongoing contact with the teachers and caretakers of referred children.
- Take care of their own physical and mental health.