

Talking to Students

When Violence Happens



When violent things happen, close to school or far away, students look to adults to help them feel safe and make sense of what happened. Offering support can be challenging for adults at school because they are also responding to the same experience. When these events involve mass violence, such as shootings that result in death and injury, there can be a range of intense reactions and intense fluctuation in emotions. This resource offers guidance for educators and school staff to talk with students following violence.

FIRST, CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Before talking with students, check in with yourself (How am I feeling? What do I need?) so that you are calm and grounded during conversations with students. You might feel scared, worried, overwhelmed, angry, helpless, sad, distracted, scattered, or numb. These feelings are completely normal following a violent event. Consider how any single event may call up past feelings; this event may layer on top of other experiences of violence and trauma. These violent events may also intersect with stress and trauma related to your identity (gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+, etc.) or the identities represented in your school community. In addition, this event may be layered on current stressors in your school or home life. Give yourself permission to acknowledge this and your feelings. The simple act of labeling emotions promotes a sense of calm. It shifts brain activity from the alarm centers of the brain to the parts of our brain that support coping and problem solving. You can label emotions silently, on paper or in conversation with supportive friends and colleagues.



Bringing awareness to your emotions and labeling them is a helpful first step.

You can help process feelings by calming your nervous system. You can use deep breaths, connection to nature, exercise or anything positive that works for you. If you have a spiritual practice, that tradition and community can offer reassurance and support meaning making following violent incidents. Sleep, nutrition, and hydration are especially important during a time when you may be overlooking basic needs to support others. It is common to need extended support, in the form of therapy, collegial collaboration, time off, and self-care. We may not be able to answer all the questions students have, but when we feel calm and grounded, we can offer the emotional support and connection students need.



Attention to your well-being makes it possible to support your students.

CLARIFY YOUR GOAL

It is helpful to start with a goal in mind, whether for whole group or one on one discussions. Overall goals may include communicating safety and support and creating a supportive space for students to share feelings, questions, and reactions. To clarify your goals, you might ask: How might I learn more about their perspective or experience? How might I show I am open and ready to listen? How might I help my students feel connected to me, this classroom or learning community? Are there individual students or groups that will need extra supports or protections?



Knowing your goal helps you prepare for challenging discussions.

ASK HELPFUL QUESTIONS

Ask open-ended questions to learn more about students' feelings, perspectives, experience and needs (What was that like for you? How are you feeling? What are you thinking/wondering about? Do you have any questions or worries? How can I help?). Less is more when it comes to questions. Students may only be interested in answering one or two questions at a time. It's okay to circle back or wait for natural opportunities to talk further.



Helpful questions encourage open sharing and allow you to learn more about students' feelings and needs.

GO SLOW, PAUSE, AND BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE

Students need a little time to respond after adults ask them questions. This is valuable time for processing emotions and coordinating thinking, especially as it relates to complex emotional situations. Make sure your body language conveys patience, openness and care: relax your shoulders and arms; hold your body at a comfortable distance; stay focused on students without looking at papers, phone, or other business.



When you pause and wait, you communicate "I have time for you," and "You are important."



REFLECT



Adults can “reflect” or simply repeat back students’ words and statements verbatim or summarize what was said. Reflection lets students know you are listening and tracking what they are sharing. When you reflect, it is important to use students’ words as much as possible so that the focus remains on their experiences.



Reflection communicates that you are listening and what students are saying is important.

LABEL EMOTIONS



Just as it is helpful for us as adults to label emotions, it is also helpful for students to label how they are feeling. Sometimes they need support to do this. You can help students label emotions by reflecting back any feeling words they say, naming feelings you notice, and taking a guess at what they are feeling. When you do this, check in with them to see if you correctly labeled emotions. Examples: I hear you saying you feel confused and angry. It sounds like you are also feeling sad, is that right? That makes a lot of sense.



Labeling emotions helps with emotion awareness and regulation.

VALIDATE AND NORMALIZE



Validation involves showing genuine acceptance, understanding, and support of students’ emotions and experience. Adults can validate by normalizing students’ emotions; let them know how common their feelings are and that a wide range of emotional responses make sense. Taking students’ perspectives, normalizing and validating feelings helps build positive relationships. You might say: I think a lot of people are feeling that way right now; That makes sense, I get it, I understand; You are not alone; I am also feeling sad this morning.



Validating and normalizing helps students feel understood and trust their own perspectives and feelings.

PROVIDE INFORMATION



Share simple facts and information about what happened and balance it with information about how adults, schools, and community systems may have stepped forward to help and create safety. Match the type and amount of information to the developmental level of students. Regardless of age, keep this part of the discussion brief, simple, true and clear. Multiple short conversations can often be more powerful than a single long conversation. Check in as you talk, and over the coming weeks, to see how students are understanding and processing information.



Remember to share bite-sized, developmentally-appropriate information and keep checking in.

Openly discuss and normalize the potential need for supports during this time, or later. Give clear guidelines for accessing help. Normalize mental health services (counselor, support staff) and commend students for accessing or accepting supports, minimizing stigma.



Normalize using school support systems and provide simple, clear procedures for all students to access extra help in the coming weeks and months.

DISCUSS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE



It might be difficult to turn away from breaking news, but know that repeated images and narratives of violence can negatively impact our emotional well-being. Discuss with students the positives and negatives of media exposure and ways to feel connected to others and set healthy limits.



Find a healthy balance of media exposure.

Visit our Website: <https://ibsweb.colorado.edu/crw/>

Email: crw@colorado.edu

NCTSN Resource

[Helping Youth After Community Trauma: Tips for Educators](#)

