

## Questions students may have after a critical incident

In the aftermath of a suicide or homicide students will have many questions. These questions may surface at any point in this intervention process. The following are some of the more common questions to think about and the phase in which they could be addressed:

- *How did it happen?* (Fact)
- *Why did I behave the way I did at the time it happened? Was that normal?* (Validation)
- *I have had some strong feelings and disturbing thoughts since this happened, am I going crazy?* (Validation) *When will I stop thinking about this?* (Prediction)
- *How will I know if I should get some help for my self or my friends?* (Prediction)
- *Why did it happen?* (Meaning)
- *Why would God let this happen?* (Meaning)
- *I'm not surprised this happened, we knew he had problems and made threats, but why didn't anyone do anything about it?* (Meaning)
- *I'm so surprised he did this, I thought he was over that problem and happy again, this doesn't make sense to me, can you explain how someone would kill themselves when they seemed to be happier?* (Meaning)
- *How could this have been avoided?* (Meaning)
- *What is our school doing to prevent this from happening here again?* (Sublimation)
- *My friends get teased and bullied all the time, what can be done to stop this from happening in our school?* (Sublimation)
- *What should I say to his parents? His sister?* (Sublimation)
- *How can I control my angry feelings so that I don't do the same thing?* (Sublimation/Affiliation)
- *I have felt depressed too, how can I make sure I don't follow the path of my friend?* (Affiliation)

Some of these questions can be answered by drawing upon the facts or our knowledge of human behavior, some answers are our own opinions, some of these questions cannot be answered at the time and some can never be answered.

In any event, students will seek answers to their questions. Adult explanations are apt to be more appropriate than those from their peers. Therefore, it is important that counselors diligently strive to give credible and reasonable explanations and thoughtful responses to questions. However, these explanations and responses must not be moralistic or judgmental. Although deaths by suicide or homicide always involve a thinking error, mental illness or some other human frailty, some students may not want to think of a deceased friend in such a negative light. They may become quite angry or turned off to a counselor who seems to be negatively judging their deceased friend. With this in mind, it is far more desirable for students participating in a discussion with the counselor, to conclude on their own, that their deceased friend or classmate was a good person who mentally ill, made a bad decision or did something wrong or improper. The counselor can then take a supportive role in helping the student think through what that conclusion means to them.

**disorientation  
physically frozen  
unable to act**



**runaway/hide or attack/fight**



**rush of emotions/thoughts**



**talking about it and figuring it out**



**back to regular routine  
but feeling badly about the event**

The following is a list of circumstances in relation to a shooting at a school that may place a person at-risk regardless of his or her style of coping. This list could be used as is or modified if necessary to identify students who are friends with someone whom they could be told may be more at-risk and in need of social support. This could be accomplished by having the facilitator read the list out loud and to ask students to raise their hand if they “have a friend who is in one or more of these categories.” This same list could also be used to identify the at-risk status of those who are present. The facilitator could repeat this activity and this time ask “How many of you can relate to the following?”

1. Is still feeling really sad, scared or angry (ask this question only if this is a delayed debriefing and most commemorative activities have ended)
2. Is friends with one of those who were injured
3. Was in the same building earlier in the day
4. Was in the same classroom earlier in the day
5. Was friends with one of those who died
6. Was friends with two or more of those who died
7. Was friends with one of those who died and had a conversation with him/her within 24 hours of their death
8. Was in the building at the time of the shooting
9. Was in the same classroom at the time of the shooting

Those who acknowledge these circumstances in a friend may have the added stress of having to help a friend which might include convincing their friend to get professional help. If they have identified themselves as personally relating to any of the above categories they are essentially identifying themselves to their peers, the facilitator and the scribe as needing a boost of social support and maybe some follow up counseling.

The following are a list of common reactions people have to the death of a friend:

- confusion
- fear
- anger
- self-blame and guilt
- sadness
- loneliness
- a sense of responsibility or regret
- reminders of the person who died
- dreams of the person who died
- concentration problems
- minor sleeping difficulties

The following are signs that the person is not adjusting well to the death:

- drawing the wrong conclusion about the cause of the death or why the death occurred
- over-idealization of the person who died
- withdrawal from people
- avoidance at all costs from anything that reminds the person of the death
- drinking or doing drugs to blunt or avoid feeling the bad feelings
- being mean to people
- not caring any more about school
- constantly thinking about death
- taking risks that seem unnecessary
- depression
- phobic behavior

## Depression

*If after about three weeks you are feeling:*

- Really unhappy, sad or empty inside most of the day
- An obvious loss of interest or pleasure in activities or friends most of the day
- A noticeable change in appetite
- Shame, self-blame or a lot of guilt nearly every day
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much nearly every day
- Crying spells or loss of energy nearly every day
- Concentration problems, difficulties making decisions and negativity about the future

## Phobic behavior

*After about a month you have or still have:*

- An exaggerated startle reaction or jumpiness to things that would mildly startle others
- An exaggerated emotional reaction to things that are a reminder of the event
- Frequent upsetting memories of the event when wanting to think about something else
- Frequent nightmares about the event
- *Withdrawal from friends and family nearly every day*
- *Extreme behaviors in order to avoid any reminder of the event*
- *Extreme pessimism about the future*

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Adapted from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision*. American Psychiatric Association, copyright © 2000. May be useful to show to students exposed to a high impact incident during step 6 of the Prediction phase.

It may be necessary to review one or more of the following explanations in step 1 of the Meaning Phase if the death is a homicide or suicide:

### **Why did it happen?**

According to page 50 in a May, 2002 US government document entitled *Threat Assessment in Schools: A guide to Managing Threatening Situations and To Creating Safe School Climates* available at [www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi\\_guide.pdf](http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf) :

- (direct or indirect) revenge for a perceived injury or injustice
- yearning for attention, recognition, or notoriety
- a wish to solve a problem otherwise seen as unbearable
- a desire to die or be killed

Later, in step 3 the facilitator could help students to focus upon indicators of his/her thinking errors and other ways he/she could have coped. The DSM diagnosis commonly associated with a school shooting is a psychotic disorder involving paranoid delusions. Suicides are usually associated with Major Depression.

It may be necessary to review either of the following in step 6 of the Meaning Phase:

### **In response to comments indicating excessive self-blame consider stating one or more of the following:**

- We are not capable of predicting the future.
- We are not able to control another person's life or activities.
- We cannot be with the person all the time.
- If we knew the person was actually going to commit suicide we would have acted differently.

— Mary Kelly Perschy

### **For the question “Why would God let this happen?” Consider asking or stating one or more of the following:**

- “There are no reasons that could satisfy us but is there some good that can come out of this tragedy?”
- “If God allowed this tragedy to occur what lessons might we learn to help us personally and make this a better community?”
- “Unanswered questions should not lead you to stop believing in God. Talk with your minister or youth group leader about this tragedy.”
- “If you believe in God pray for ...”

Below are lists of examples of desirable or adaptive self-assessment statements following a critical incident. Consider asking students, in step 7 of the Meaning phase, to identify which of the following ones they agree with:

- “I did the best I could under the circumstances”
- “Bad things can happen (randomly) to good and innocent people”
- “There are dangers in life”
- “The shooter was a very disturbed person”
- “I learned from it”
- “It's in the past”
- “I am safe”
- “I feel like I have control over what happens to me in my life”
- “I can trust myself”
- “I am a good person”
- “For the most part this town is a pretty safe place to live”
- “Since I have lived through this I have a better idea of what is important to me and what is not”
- “This event has caused me to feel closer to the important people in my life”
- “This experience has made me feel a little more grown up”
- “If I can live through something like that, then I can do a whole lot more than I thought I could”\*
- “I feel like I can handle what comes my way a little better because of what I have lived through”
- “Nowadays I feel like every new day I am alive is a gift”

The following are undesirable or maladaptive statements to be aware of. Students who disclose any of these statements will need additional assistance.

- “It is my fault”
- “He did this because of me”
- “I am such a coward”
- “I should have acted differently at the time”
- “I cannot go back in to that place”
- “I believe this will happen again to me”
- “I feel like something bad is just waiting around the next corner to happen”
- “It is hard for me to trust anymore”
- “Its hard for me to be sure of anything these days”
- “I think I will be punished because of this”
- “There is something wrong with me”
- “This has mentally damaged me for life”
- “I feel cut off from people these days”
- “I feel like I am going crazy over this”

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Adapted from the World View Survey copyright (1997) by Kenneth Fletcher, University of Massachusetts, Medical School, Worcester, MA and from Shapiro, F. *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing: Basic Principles, Protocols and Procedures*. New York, NY: Guilford Press 1995. By Jerry Ciffone, School Social Worker, School District U-46, Elgin, IL 8/11/02. \*Quote from Colin Goddard added 4/30/07.