

Things to Consider In Responding to Secondary Traumatization

Secondary Traumatization is defined as:

THE STRESS THAT RESULTS FROM THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRAMATIZING EVENTS

Because we are caring people, when we see reports of traumatic events, we ourselves can be traumatized almost as though we were experiencing the event itself. This is known as secondary traumatization. However, the experience is different in that the underlying event does not directly impact our lives. In turn, it is even more difficult to respond to because we have no real event to focus on or grieve, just the non-specific fear that can come with stress. This can be compounded if we have experiences or circumstances in our lives that are similar to those surrounding the underlying event. Young people in particular often do not have enough life experience to keep things in perspective and this fear can become overwhelming. The following are some common reactions you may see in individuals who are experiencing secondary traumatization. For youth their reactions will vary with age and the developmental stage they have reached. Generally older youth will need to talk and be reminded of the skills they have to deal with trauma. Younger children will need more reassurance that things are ok and who to go to for help.

Common Reactions to Trauma

◆ Preoccupation with the facts	◆ Flashbacks to past events or losses
◆ Fear of returning to school	◆ Fear it could happen to them
◆ A sense of helplessness	◆ Sleep disruption
◆ Eating disruptions	◆ Concentration problems
◆ Intrusive thoughts	◆ Fear of changes in schedule/routine
◆ Fear that parents or close friends may not come back	◆ Fear of anyone who looks like someone in the news
◆ Fear/panic associated with sirens, police or ambulances	◆ Fear of weapons
◆ Restlessness	◆ Physical complaints
◆ Social withdrawal	◆ Regressive behavior

It is important for traumatized individuals to feel like they can be in control again and that they have the means to regain control and feel safe. The following are some intervention strategies to consider.

Intervention Strategies

❖ Listen

- ◆ Sometimes there is not so much a need to receive advice as to have a chance to share what you are experiencing.
- ◆ Let them hear from others that they are not the only ones feeling this way.
- ◆ Try not to use too many “war stories.” They may cloud the event and distance you from the youth e.g. devalue what they have to say.

❖ Reassure

- ◆ “What skills do you already have that will help you now?”
- ◆ “What have you done before you felt this way?”
- ◆ Discuss the crisis plans that exist.
- ◆ Remind them that these are very rare events.
- ◆ “What can you do when you feel angry, scared, helpless etc.?”
- ◆ Emphasize that the reactions they are having are natural reactions to trauma and stress.
- ◆ “Ambulances etc. are good things. They may sound scary, but they also help people.”

- ❖ **Plan** – Help them develop a personal safety plan that includes knowing who to go to for help.

❖ Act

- ◆ Discuss what each of them could do to constructively express what they are feeling. Some may want to send a card to the families. Others may want to become active in doing things that would reduce the likelihood that this could happen here.
- ◆ Doing something may be most important to younger children because they may not gain as much from a discussion. Involve them in the discussion of what to do.
- ◆ Older youth may find writing or journaling helpful.

❖ Communicate

- ◆ Let staff, parents and students know what the response plans are.
- ◆ Share intervention strategies with parents and staff so they can be of assistance to those affected.

If you have any questions or comments please contact Gary Logan 544-6811 or Michelle Rose at 544-2911