

“Violence-Related Stress: A Guide for School Staff”

NEA Safe Schools Now Network Broadcast #6

Discussion Guide

An Important Note Before Viewing This Program

This program deals directly with some difficult issues and experiences faced by both community members and school personnel. During a preliminary viewing, portions of this program had a strong emotional impact on viewers.

Because the program goes beyond simply presenting information, we have included in this accompanying discussion guide suggested questions designed to help viewers talk about the thoughts and feelings that this show may bring up for them. We also have included questions to facilitate discussion among viewers on what steps they can take to address violence-related stress in constructive and positive ways for their schools and communities. As in previous shows we encourage school personnel and community members to tape this show and to watch it as a community.

Overview

In the NEA Safe Schools Now Network's sixth program, *Violence-Related Stress: A Guide for School Staff*, we look at effective practices and programs that help students and staff prepare for and manage the stress that results from exposure to violent trauma. Our show begins with a panel discussion by three experts who talk about the importance of preparing a comprehensive plan for dealing with all kinds of traumatic events. They explain that violence-induced stress can extend to people who were not on the scene nor physically injured. Our experts emphasize the importance of schools and communities meeting the mental health needs of both staff and students following exposure to violent trauma. Their discussion prepares us for a visit to La Cima Middle School, in Tucson, Arizona and Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, where school staff and community-based personnel share with us the effective practices and programs that they have developed to address violence-related stress. We then visit with six school staff who share their own, personal experiences with violence-related stress.

First, we hear from school staff at La Cima Middle School in Tucson, Arizona. We learn about The *Tucson Resiliency Initiative*, which implements evidence-based practices based on the concept of resiliency. Resiliency is a set of characteristics and skills that helps people and communities overcome difficult circumstances and keeps them functional in the face of adversity. At La Cima Middle School, resiliency is built by creating respectful connections among everyone. This atmosphere motivates and supports students to perform beyond expectations, and reduces stress for both staff and students. The *Language Register*, one component of the resiliency initiative at La Cima, teaches students to use language that is nourishing, edifying, and strengthening. Replacing negative language with positive language reduces the potential for violence and lowers

the overall level of stress within the school community. *Team Celebrations*, another component of the initiative, recognizes and rewards student achievements of all kinds - beyond academic or athletic success. It gives all students the opportunity to observe that there are rewards for meeting responsibilities and minimizes discipline problems by rewarding and enfranchising students who might otherwise be overlooked. A third component of the initiative, *Teen Court*, puts the responsibility for monitoring behavior and meting out consequences on students. Part of an overall positive approach to discipline, Teen Court provides for students to set their own rules and see those rules enforced by their peers.

Next, we visit Montgomery County, Maryland, where collaboration between county agencies, such as the Montgomery County Crisis Center, and the school system has yielded comprehensive crisis response preparedness. We view a crisis response simulation, which includes school personnel using an *emergency kit* containing key equipment and information that enable staff to respond to a crisis with confidence. We then return to La Cima Middle School where we observe a lock-down drill. When handled appropriately, drills of this type actually reduce overall stress and contribute to feelings of safety among students and staff who, in the event that a crisis occurs, can anticipate that things will happen as practiced. Our program then returns to Montgomery County Public Schools to observe staff members participating in a simulated post-incident activity to provide support and lessen the impact of violence-related stress.

In the final portion of the program, we visit with six school staff who share with us their personal experiences coping with the emotional impact of violent trauma. In this powerful segment, the staff describe how their experiences have affected them and identify the factors or measures that have helped or hindered their recovery from exposure to violence.

Notes/Suggestions to Discussion Leader

Make copies of all questions (Sections I, II, III) and distribute them at appropriate times before and after the broadcast. When watching the taped broadcast, you may stop and start the videotape at appropriate discussion points.

I. Questions To Think About As You Watch The Broadcast.

Think about the following questions to better understand the issue of violence-related stress in schools and the elements of successful practices and programs to reduce it.

Why is it important to address the mental health needs of staff and students following exposure to a traumatic or violent event?

What is the concept of resiliency? How does resiliency reduce the day-to-day stress of staff in schools? How do the Language Register, Teen Court, and Team Celebrations implemented at La Cima Middle School increase resiliency and contribute to stress reduction among staff and students?

What is school crisis response preparedness? What are the elements of a good crisis response preparedness program? What are the advantages to forming school-community partnerships to develop a crisis response preparedness program?

What is a lock-down drill? What are its expected benefits? What disadvantages might there be to conducting lock-down drills? How might these disadvantages be overcome?

II. Questions to Think About After You Watch The Broadcast.

Think about the following questions to help you better understand the issues of violence-related stress as they relate to your own school and community.

Addressing the Impact of Violence on Mental Health

What experience(s), if any, have you had that relate to this program?

Violence can exist in a variety of forms, each having a different impact on the people who are exposed to it. Some of the school staff in this program experienced highly publicized incidents of violence whereas others experienced violence that did not receive such media attention. In what form, if any, does violence manifest in your school or community - e.g., threats? bullying? fighting? vandalism? hate crimes? gangs? murder? suicide? What other forms of violent trauma, although not intentional, affect your school or community - e.g., violent auto accidents? fires? natural disasters?

What opportunities do you have in your school or community to come together to respond to the violence-related stress needs among school staff?

This program illustrates that every individual and every school and community is unique and, as a result, each will have different reactions and different needs following a traumatic event. What unique needs do you, as an individual, and does your school and community have? What unique resources do you and your school and community have to bring to your efforts to address the mental health of school staff?

Resiliency

Could a resiliency paradigm be useful in your school(s)? If so, how? If not, why not?

What might a resiliency paradigm in your school(s) look like? How would you implement it?

What obstacles might you encounter to implementing a resiliency paradigm? How might you overcome them?

What resources would you need to move ahead on applying a resiliency paradigm in your school(s) or community?

School-Community Partnerships

Are school-community partnerships for crisis response preparedness, such as what you saw in Montgomery County, Maryland, viable in your community?

How would your school(s) and community respond to practicing lock-down drills and other, similar crisis response drills? What feelings might such drills engender in your school(s) and community? What steps would need to be taken to ensure that drills do not cause more stress than they are designed to relieve?

III. Next Steps

Questions for discussion regarding (1) beginning a plan of action toward reducing violence-related stress; and (2) plans for viewing future programs.

Do you want to plan a meeting to continue this discussion? If so, who should organize and plan the next meeting? Who should you invite to join you?

What additional information or other resources do you need to move forward? Are there other steps you might take in light of this program and your discussion today?

Do you, as a group, want to watch the next NEA Safe Schools Now Network program, "Addressing Bias and Hate in the School Setting?" If so, who should you invite to join you and who should organize and lead the discussion?