

# **\*Emergency Mental Health and Traumatic Stress**

## **Tips for Teachers**

### **Marking Disaster Anniversaries in the Classroom**

*[Note: This fact sheet was prepared as a resource to help children deal with normal recovery issues that may be triggered by the anniversary of a disaster. The activities suggested here might be helpful as you anticipate and address issues that may emerge. It can be adapted for use with any disaster and can be used any time from the first day following the disaster to one or more years later.]*

Disaster anniversaries will cause many people to reflect and even re-experience thoughts, feelings, and events that occurred at the time of the attacks and in the days, weeks, and months that followed.

There will no doubt be a media flood of anniversary footage with images of the wildfires, as well as predictions from future fire events. This coverage will reactivate the feelings of people in communities throughout the community.

As a teacher, you have probably witnessed a wide range of reactions from children since the disaster events. These responses can emerge or be reactivated by anniversary memories, images, and fears. In the classroom, you may observe increased activity levels, decreased attention spans, behavior and defiance problems, and even increased isolation and withdrawal. Some children may not exhibit observable reactions. Others may have noticeable reactions that linger anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

The degree of a child's reaction will vary depending upon the experiences of the child and his or her family during the disaster. Even families who did not lose a home or a loved one may have been affected in other ways, such as economic shifts or hardships. Recent losses or traumatic events, as well as other factors related to the child's individual life experiences and unique make-up, also affect reactions.

Classroom activities that focus on survivorship and recovery - what has been gained or learned since the disaster - are particularly encouraged. Story writing or artwork can help children compare their initial reactions to the disaster with where they are now. Going over school emergency plans for disasters is also useful. Keeping an optimistic focus on the future can help to normalize reactions.

As your students mark the disaster anniversary, the activities listed below may be helpful in addressing recovery issues that an anniversary brings forth:

#### **Pre-school and Kindergarten**

- Construct hats, serve cookies and drinks, and sing songs to commemorate the anniversary.
- Ask children to draw a picture of themselves and their families now, after the events. Encourage, but do not force, them to discuss and share their feelings.
- Ask each child to tell a story about how his or her family was affected by the events. Respect the silence of children who are not comfortable talking.
- Play a physical game or dance to music to "shake out" scary feelings.

#### **Elementary School**

- Fold a sheet of paper in half. On one side of the fold, ask the children to draw a picture of themselves and their families the day of the events. On the other side of the fold, ask the children to draw themselves and their families now.
- Ask children to compose a list of people they can talk to who help them feel better about the

events.

- Ask children to write or describe to the class:
  - > The changes they have experienced since the events.
  - > What they have learned from the events about themselves, their family, and their school.
  - > How they feel and how they think their families feel now that a year has passed.
  - > What is important to remember in the event of a future wildfire.
- Create a mural that depicts the children's feelings and experiences about the events.
- Produce a booklet of classroom drawings and reactions about the anniversary.
- Initiate a sentence completion exercise. Ask children to either say or write answers to questions, such as:

For me, the hardest thing about the disaster events was \_\_\_\_\_.

For me, the best thing that resulted from the disaster events was \_\_\_\_\_.

If I could suggest one thing to my teachers/parents during the disaster anniversary, it would be \_\_\_\_\_.

Before the disaster, I \_\_\_\_\_.

If I could suggest one thing to my teachers/parents during the disaster, it would be \_\_\_\_\_.

Before the disaster, I \_\_\_\_\_.

During the disaster, I \_\_\_\_\_.

Since the disaster, I \_\_\_\_\_.

Right now I feel \_\_\_\_\_.

The worst thing that happened to me was \_\_\_\_\_.

The best thing that happened to me was \_\_\_\_\_.

## Junior High and High School

For teenagers, team projects can be an action-oriented way to relate to members of their peer group and develop a sense of togetherness about issues regarding the disaster events. Activities should focus on the positive steps made so far in the recovery process. The following topics can be adapted to classroom discussions, essays, and projects:

- The local, regional, and statewide impact (emotional, economic, environmental, etc.) of the disaster events.
- Heroes of the disaster events.
- The role of the individual/family/community in recovery.
- The history of wildland fires locally, regionally, and statewide.
- The role of government in responding to wildfires.

As you engage your students in these activities, there are some general guidelines to keep in mind:

- Acknowledge losses, fears, and other emotional adjustments that accompany wildland fires.
- Provide reassurance that the thoughts, feelings, and reactions stirred up by the anniversary are normal, even though they may be upsetting.
- Help the students to feel "safe" when revisiting the fires. Tell them that there is no right or wrong way to do the activities and that each student will be respected for his or her contribution.
- Speak to your students' strengths by focusing on the progress already made in the recovery process at the personal, family, neighborhood, and community levels.
- Make students aware that not everyone is at the same place in the healing process, and that is okay.
- Enhance your students' sense of mastery and survivorship over a natural disaster and encourage them to adapt what they learned from the events to other life situations.

- Use an optimistic approach to bring closure to thoughts, feelings, and reactions that may be opened up by the anniversary.
- Consult a school counselor or mental health profession

Additional resources can be found here:

[mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/links.asp](http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/links.asp)

\* Adapted from SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/after.asp>