How to Help Students After Tragedies Like the Sandy Hook Massacre: A Fast First Aid Guide for Teachers

By Ruth Herman Wells, M.S.
Director, Youth Change Workshops
www.youthchg.com, dwells@youthchg.com

Five years ago, when I was first asked to write this column for SEEN Magazine, I used to write a lot about what teachers and principals could do to prevent students from creating serious tragedies like school shootings. Five years later, I am stunned to be writing about what teachers and principals can do to help students cope with school massacres committed by adult outsiders.

It is a grave new world that your training never imagined, and most certainly never prepared you for. As someone who routinely helps provide help and professional development to schools after a tragedy has occurred, I want to fill in that gap in your professional training as best I can.

I know that teachers are already stretched paper thin, tackling one “extra” chore after the other-- but add to the top of the list, the necessary task helping children to cope in the aftermath of school massacres.

Books could be written about what to do and what not to do to help children following a tragedy, whether it be a school shooting, a terrorist event, or destructive storm. I have less than a 1000 words to spend, so here are just a few of the most critical, must-know steps for teachers who now must also function as quasi-mental health counselors.

1. **Limit exposure to coverage of the tragedy**: Recent studies of brain functioning show that “neurons that fire together, wire together.” Too much exposure can lead to a freeze frame effect, even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for vulnerable children already coping with serious trauma and crisis.
2. **There is no one right way for children to cope:** A Holocaust survivor wrote that "an abnormal reaction to abnormal circumstances is normal." The recent tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School is as far from normal as you can get. Expect a huge array of different reactions. That’s the one thing that is normal. Watch for students who appear to be struggling to cope— no matter what type of reaction they evidence.

3. **Tips on how to tell if students are struggling to cope:** Watch for crying; sleep problems; withdrawal; radically increased or decreased activity; verbal expressions of upset; non-verbal expressions of upset; changes in hair style or dress; self-harm or self-endangering; change in behavior or demeanor; weight fluctuations; increased or decreased eating; worsening of existing mental health issues; increased anxiety level; altered peer interactions; isolation; declining academic performance; or perseverating on the trauma or other upsetting events. Be sure to remember that you can’t always judge a book by its cover. The student who appears to be just fine, may be feeling absolutely awful inside.

4. **Get help from mental health professionals:** Whenever you’re not sure if a student is struggling to cope, seek help from mental health professionals. If that’s not possible, consult your supervisor right away. You can’t be too careful about your students’ safety so when you’re not sure what to do, seek help.

5. **Many longstanding guidelines about trauma management have been updated recently:** As you are probably aware, the conventional wisdom in mental health has long been that it is of benefit to children to write about the trauma, or create pictures, poems or art projects about it. The rationale was that these activities helped children “process” or “come to grips” with the trauma. As noted earlier, new neurobiology findings convincingly show that recapitulating traumatic events is counter-productive, and “cements in” the incident.

6. **Teach thought management:** New research and work by Dr. Daniel Siegel and others, dramatically shows that brains are far more malleable and trainable than previously believed. That means that you can teach students that they do not have to be live with upsetting thoughts, that they have the power to control their thinking. Suggest to students that they can stop bad thoughts. One way to accomplish that goal is teach children to think “Stop,” then to think of three things that are good or okay right now. Those steps can disrupt continual recycling of frightening thoughts.

7. **Challenge students who perseverate:** Some teens and children who already had depressive or dark tendencies may vigorously resist helping themselves to avoid upsetting thoughts. Some of the older students may even say that it’s shallow or insensitive to not watch news coverage of traumatic events. You can
ask these youngsters to identify what good comes from them feeling bad (none). Attempt to channel their concern into specific tasks like seeking contributions to help the devastated region.

8. **Balance your expectations:** Remember how overwhelmed and devastated you felt when you first heard about what happened at Sandy Hook? But, you’re an intact adult with grown-up reasoning skills. Many children and teens lack those skills or the perspective that time has given you. When you’re not sure how hard to push students to work in school following a traumatic event, be careful not to add too much too fast. You can quickly put too much weight on the shoulders of a child already struggling to carry a heavy load. Instead, strike a balance between being sensitive to the child’s emotional state and your mandate to educate students.

This article offers you some very basic first aid steps to help children after a traumatic event. Immediately following the Sandy Hook massacre, subscribers to my online newsletter, received extensive, step-by-step guidance on helping students to cope with the massacre. Visit this link to read that newsletter issue, *How to Help Children and Teens Cope with the Violence and Tragedy of the Connecticut Massacre:* [http://www.youthchg.com/blog12dec2.html](http://www.youthchg.com/blog12dec2.html).

Author and Workshop Instructor Ruth Herman Wells M.S. is the Director of Youth Change Workshops, [http://www.youthchg.com](http://www.youthchg.com). Her *Breakthrough Strategies to Teach and Counsel Troubled Youth Workshop* will be in Seattle, WA on May 2-3, 2013, and in Portland, OR on October 10-11, 2013. Ruth’s workshops are offered online, at your site, and in general sessions, all with college credit and free clock hours. Ruth’s books include *The Behavior Change Handouts Series*. Email Ruth at dwells@youthchg.com or call 800-545-5736. Get Ruth’s free *Problem Student Problem-Solver Magazine* and hundreds of other interventions at [www.youthchg.com](http://www.youthchg.com).