Supporting children at times of crisis

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Outline of Presentation

• How to support children after a disaster
• Symptoms of adjustment reactions
• Timeline for adjustment
• Professional self-care
Psychological first aid

• Provide broadly to those impacted
• Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
• All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope

• **Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress**
PFA Actions (source: American Red Cross)

- Observation or awareness
- Make a connection
- Help people feel comfortable and at ease
- Be kind, calm, & compassionate
- Assist with basic needs
- Listen
- Give realistic reassurance
- Encourage good coping
- Help people connect
- Give accurate and timely information
- Suggest a referral resource
- End the conversation
Basic needs are basic

- UWF (Brief Therapy)
- Need to deal with basic needs before able to address emotional needs
  - Safety, security
  - Food, shelter
  - Communication and reunification with family
- Staff have their own basic needs
  - Crisis plans need to address them as a priority
Potential symptoms of adjustment reactions

• Sleep problems
• Separation anxiety and school avoidance
• Anxiety and trauma-related fears
• Difficulties with concentration
• Deterioration in academic performance
• Regression
• Depression; Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities
• Substance abuse
• Somatization
Post-traumatic stress disorder

- Exposure to death, serious injury, or sexual violence
- Re-experiencing traumatic event
  - Recurrent, intrusive, distressing memories
  - Recurrent, distressing dreams
  - Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks); post-traumatic play
- Avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma
- Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
- Increased arousal
  - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
  - Irritability or anger
  - Self-destructive behavior
  - Hypervigilance or exaggerated startle
Range of reactions to crisis

• Wide range of reactions and concerns
  ➢ Not just PTSD

• Bereavement

• Secondary losses and stressors
  – Relocation
  – Loss of peer network
  – Academic failure
  – New social network
  – Financial stresses
  – Parental stress, mental health problems
  – Marital conflict or domestic violence

• One crisis often awakens feelings related to pre-existing or past crisis
Parents often underestimate symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness
Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = baseline functioning
B = event
C = vulnerable state
D = usual coping mechanisms fail
E = helplessness, hopelessness
F = improved functioning

G = continued impairment
H = return to baseline
I = post-traumatic growth
Importance of professional self-care

- Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress
- It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized
- Create a culture where:
  - it is ok to be upset
  - members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
Website resources

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

www.grievingstudents.org

AAP Children and Disasters – www.aap.org/disasters

– Coping and adjustment: www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
For further information about NCSCB visit us, call us, like us, share us:

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National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
On-line learning module

National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health (Psychosocial Impacts of Disasters on Children)

http://ncdmph.usuhs.edu/KnowledgeLearning/2013-Learning2.htm