

Psychological First Aid

for Schools K-12



Course Objectives:

- Enhance immediate and on-going safety by providing emotional support.
- Offer practical assistance, and coping skills to help deal with the emotional impact of a traumatic event.
- Recognize common stress responses in children/adolescents and provide basic triage skills to know when to refer to professional Behavioral Health services.
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of personal stress and learn self care strategies to increase resilience in yourself and others.



Psychological First Aid

Recommended as the Standard Acute Behavioral Health Intervention by:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
- American Psychological Association (APA)
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH)
- National Center for PTSD, Terrorism & Disaster Branch
- Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)



NIMH Expert Panel Recommendations: 1st 2 weeks

Recommended:

- Psychological First Aid (PFA) appears evidence-consistent, non-toxic.

Not recommended:

- CISD (given the negative findings and the findings re: worsening of symptoms)
- CBT and EMDR may be contra-indicated, given that they both encourage disclosure and emotional processing and may interrupt a necessary down-time. Systematic research lacking for 1st 2 weeks.



Early interventions (2 wks-3 months):

High Evidence: None

Medium Evidence:

- CBT
- Psychoeducation
- Active problem-solving, coping skills
- Cognitive Restructuring
- Exposure exercises (primarily for anxiety disorders)

Low Evidence: Debriefing, EMDR, Alternative Interventions



Psychological First Aid (PFA)

- **Principles and techniques of PFA meet four basic standards:**
 - Consistent with research evidence on risk and resilience following trauma
 - Applicable and practical in field settings
 - Appropriate to developmental level across the lifespan
 - Culturally informed

Psychological First Aid Basics

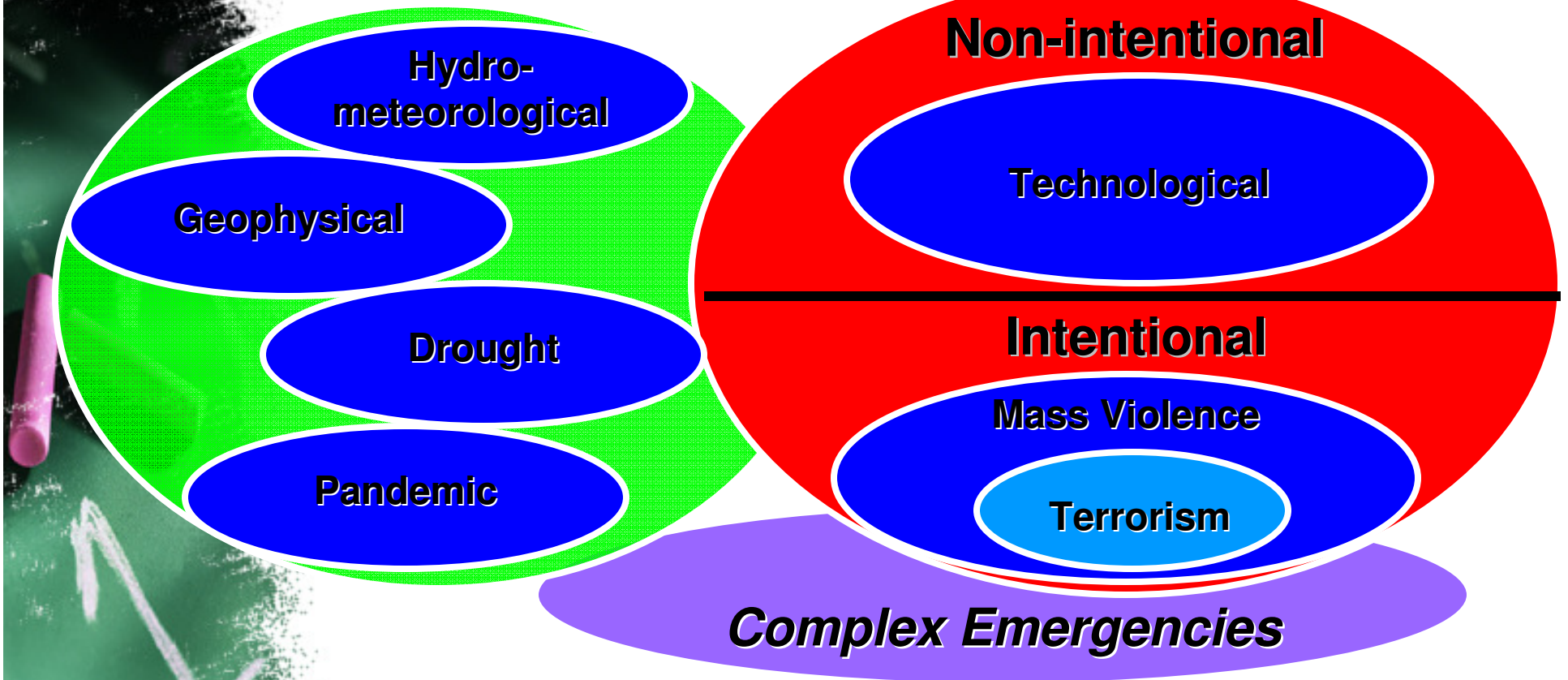
- Expect normal recovery
- Recognize survivor strengths
- Promote resilience



Traumatic Events

Natural Disasters

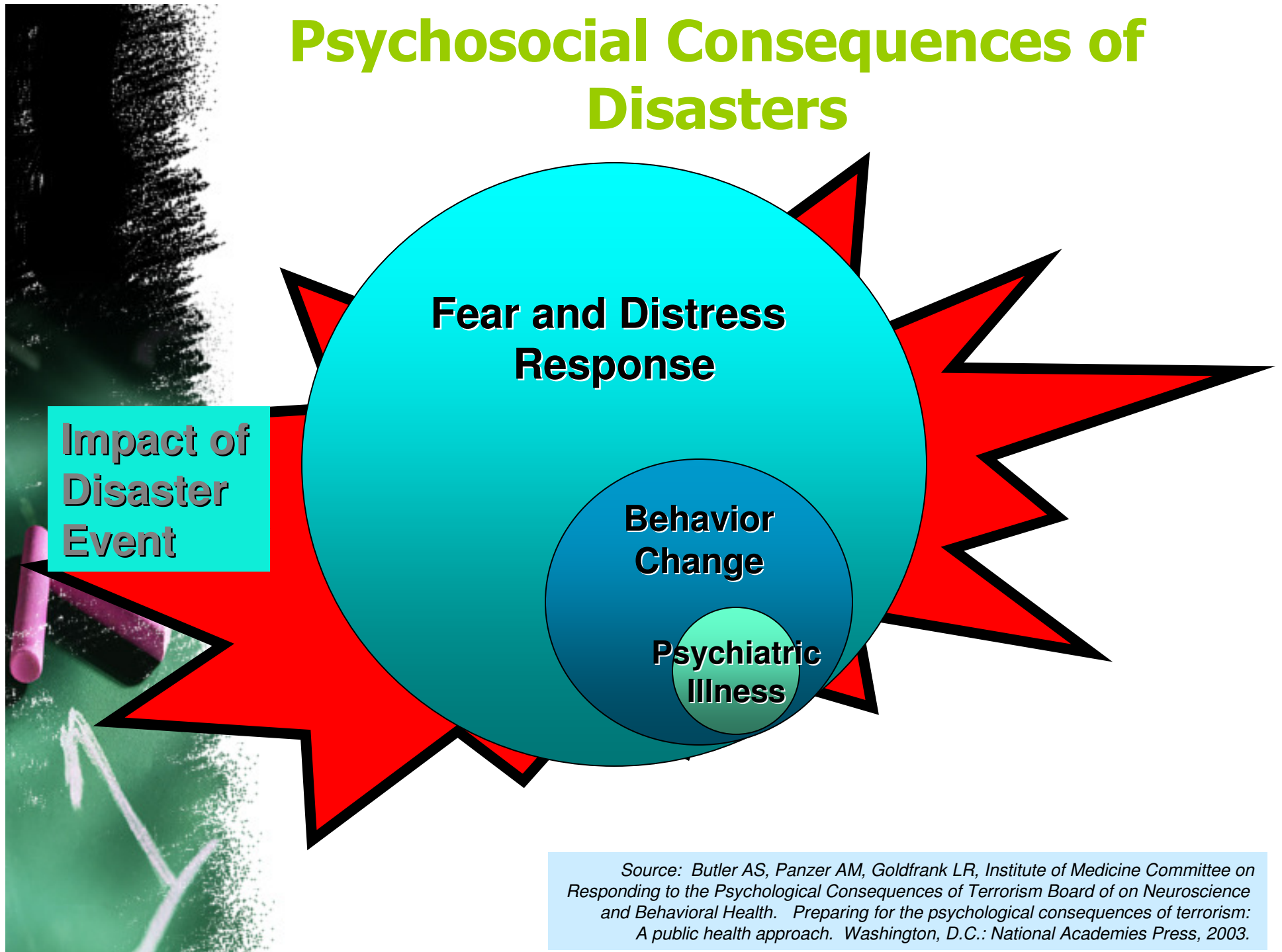
Human-Generated Disasters



Trauma at School

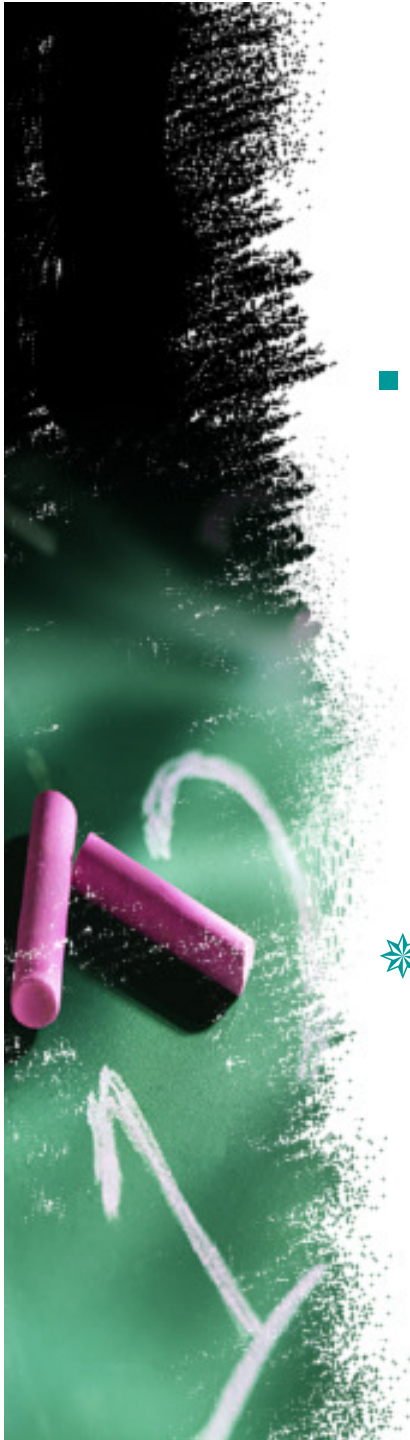


Psychosocial Consequences of Disasters



What is Stress?

- The International Federation of the Red Cross defines stress as “A very broad term referring to the effect of anything in life to which people must adjust.”
- ✧ The key is that stress requires us to adjust our attention and behavior and makes demands upon our energy.



Types of Trauma

- **Individual Trauma**
— Stress & grief reactions
- **Collective Trauma**
— Damages the bonds of the communities' social fabric



Event is More Stressful or Traumatic When.....

- Event is unexpected
- Many people die, especially children
- Event lasts a long time
- The cause is unknown
- The event is poignant or meaningful
- Event impacts a large area



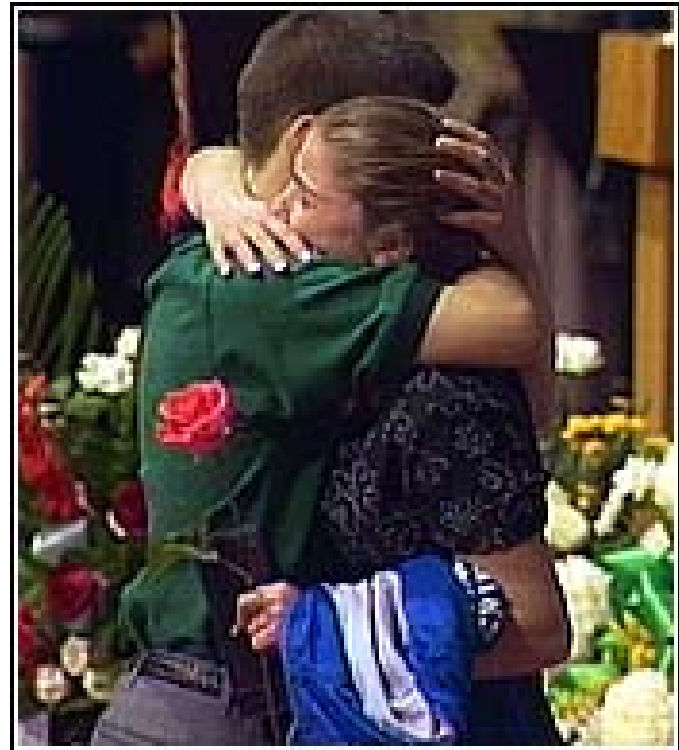
Additional burdens for children

- Affected by parents' reactions and experiences
- Limited by their language, developmental stage (magical thinking) and their experience



Traumatic Stress Creates:

- Physical Changes
- Emotional Changes
- Cognitive Changes
- Behavioral Changes
- Spiritual Changes



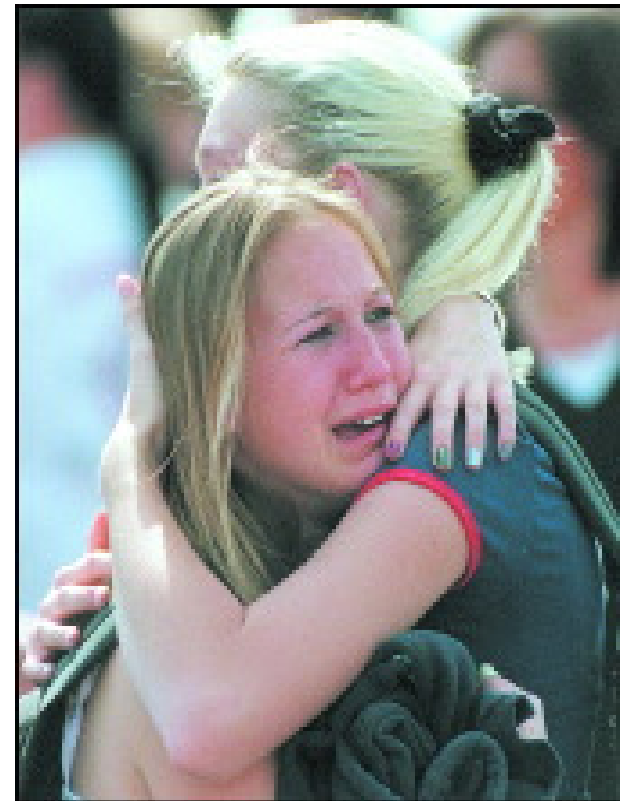
Common Physical Reactions

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Nausea
- Eating Problems
- Speech Difficulties
- Skin eruptions



Common Emotional Reactions

- Anxiety & Vulnerability
- Fear of reoccurrence
- Fear of being left alone
 - Particularly if separated from family
- Loss of “Sense of Safety”
- Depression
- Anger
- Guilt



Common Behavioral Reactions

- “Childish” or regressive behavior
 - May not be deliberate acting out
- Bedtime problems
 - Sleep onset insomnia
 - Mid-night awakening
 - Fear of dark
 - Fear of event reoccurrence during night



Common Cognitive Reactions

- Confusion, memory loss, and disorientation
- Difficulty in concentrating
 - May appear as behavioral problems in classroom
- School may be where child functions best
 - Continuing Structure, sense of control
 - Social group



Sensory Reactions

- Sight
- Sound
- Smell
- Taste
- Touch




Common Spiritual Reactions

- Anger toward their spiritual Higher Power
- Find comfort in their faith, or question their faith
- Wonder why bad things can happen to children
- Question why people hurt other people



Psychological First Aid





*SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION:
Psychological First Aid for Disaster Survivors*

PFA: TARGET OUTCOMES

Physical health:

Restore SAFETY

Psychological health:

Facilitate FUNCTION

Behavioral health:

Empower ACTION

First and Most Important

**Every Adult On Campus
Plays an Important Role**



The Role of Caring Adults

- **Protect** (SAFETY)
- **Listen** (COMFORT)
- **Connect**
(CONNECTION)
- **Model** (PRACTICAL
ASSISTANCE)
- **Teach** (EDUCATION)



*SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION:
Psychological First Aid for Disaster Survivors*

SAFETY

SAFETY

SUSTAIN

SAFEGUARD

What Survivors Need:

Safety
Security
Shelter
Basic Survival Needs

What To Do:

Provide safety and security.
Provide shelter.
Reduce stressors.
Provide food, water, ice.
Provide medical care, alleviate pain.
Provide sanitation.

Safeguard & Sustain

- Offer physical comforts
- Provide for health care needs



Protect

- Maintain structure, stability, and predictability by having predictable routines, clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback
- Keep your ears open and eyes watchful for bullying.
- Try to keep environment free of anything that could re-traumatize the child



Provide Safety

- Ensure immediate physical safety
- Protect from additional trauma and potential trauma reminders

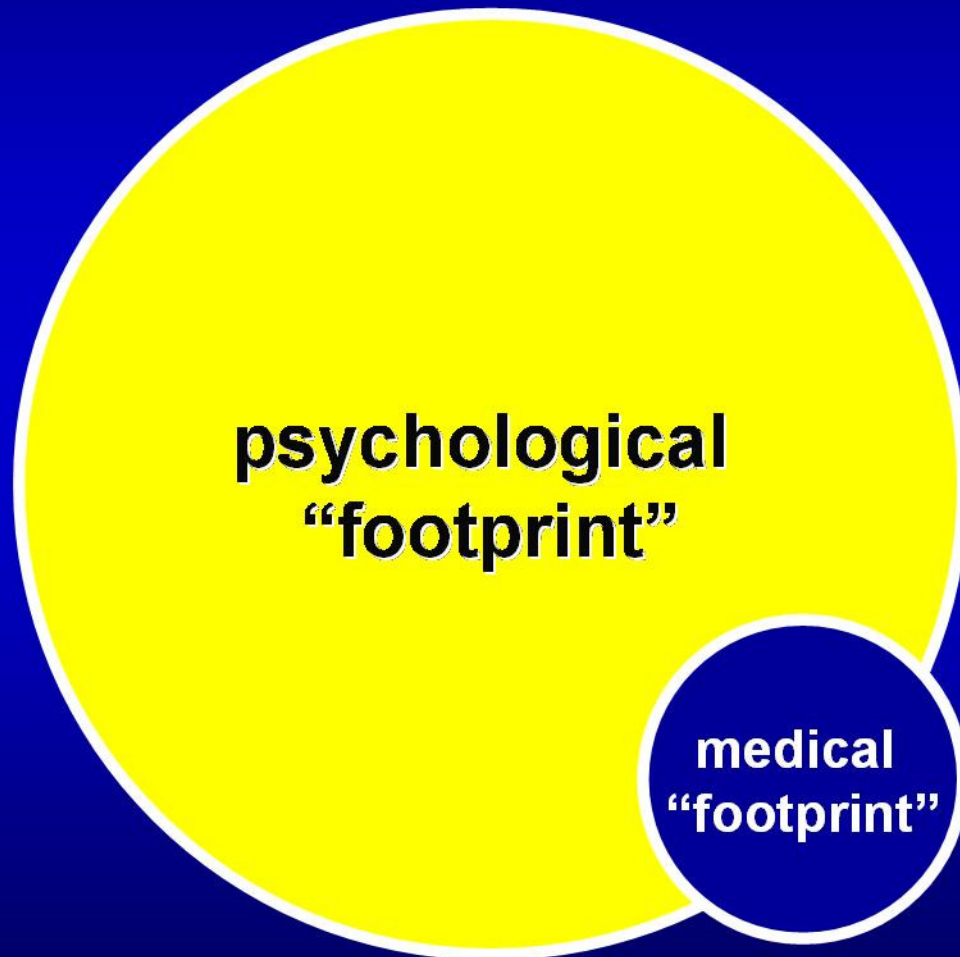


Michael Conroy / AP file

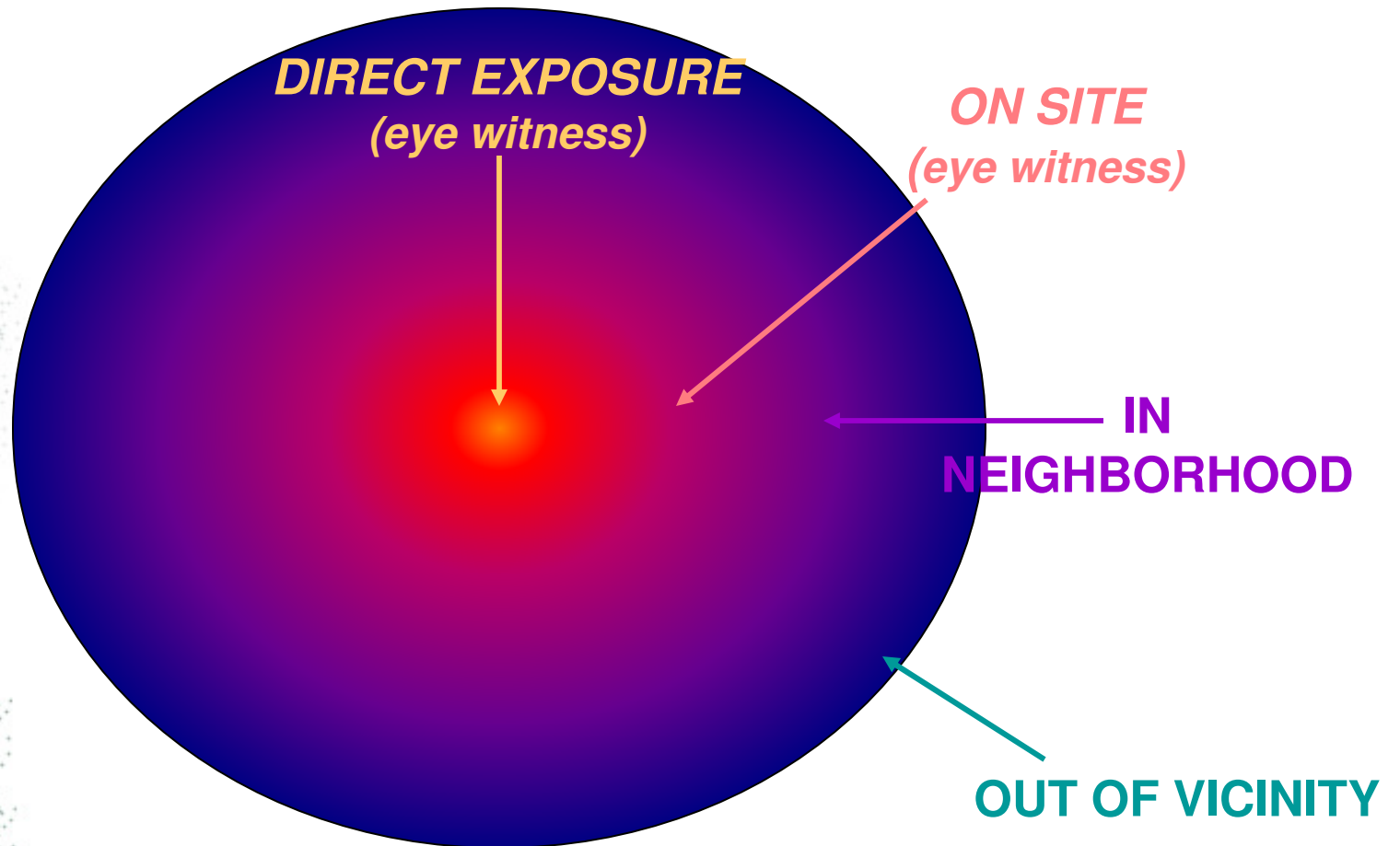


Psychological vs. Medical “Footprint”

In a disaster,
the size of the
psychological
“footprint”
greatly
exceeds the
size of the
medical
“footprint.”



PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPOSURE RISK ZONES



Risk Factors for Adverse Reactions

- History of trauma
- Poor social support
- History of psychopathology
- A shy and fearful nature
- Previous history of losses
- Adverse reactions of family members
- Be sensitive to seemingly unrelated concerns



Address Special Needs

- Incident dependent: Anyone may have special needs
- Essential Functional Needs (**CMIST**)
 - **C**ommunication
 - **M**edical
 - Functional **I**ndependence
 - **S**upervision
 - **T**ransportation



How do you determine emotional trauma exposure?

Psychological Triage

Assess:

- Physical proximity
- Emotional proximity
- Similar previous experience
- Fragile personality
- History of emotional disturbance



Scenario:

Car accident: A female high school sophomore was killed in a single car crash on Saturday evening.

What further information do you need?





Verified Information

- Her sister was driving the car and survived. Her sister graduated the prior year from the same school, and she had no other siblings
- No one else was in the car.
- The accident was due to ice on the road, no speed or alcohol was involved.
- The student was on the soccer team and was a member of the Student Council.
- Several students were in a separate car behind her vehicle and witnessed the accident.
- Several more students arrived on the scene after first responders arrived.

**Who might be impacted by
this event?**





- Sister
- Eye witnesses to the accident
- Eye witnesses to the scene
- Soccer team
- Student council
- Friends
- Homeroom
- Classmates
- Sister's friends
- Coaches
- Teachers
- Parents
- Boyfriend(s)
- Students with recent personal losses
- Students with history of trauma

*SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION:
Psychological First Aid for Disaster Survivors*

FUNCTION

FUNCTION

COMFORT

What Survivors Need:

Soothing human contact
Validation that reactions are “Common”.

What To Do:

Establish compassionate “presence.”
Listen actively.
Comfort, console, soothe, and reassure.
Apply stress management techniques.
Reassure survivors that their reactions are
“common” and expectable

Listen

- Encourage youth to share experiences and express feelings of fear or concern
- Be willing to listen and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues
- Give children extra reassurance, support, and encouragement



Information Gathering

- Nature and severity of experiences
- Death of a loved one
- Concerns about the immediate post-disaster circumstances and ongoing threat
- Separation from or concerns about the safety of loved ones
- Physical illness and need for medications



Information Gathering cont.

- Losses incurred as a result of the disaster
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Thoughts about causing harm to self or others
- Lack of adequate supportive social network
- Prior alcohol or drug use or psychiatric problems
- Prior exposure to trauma and loss



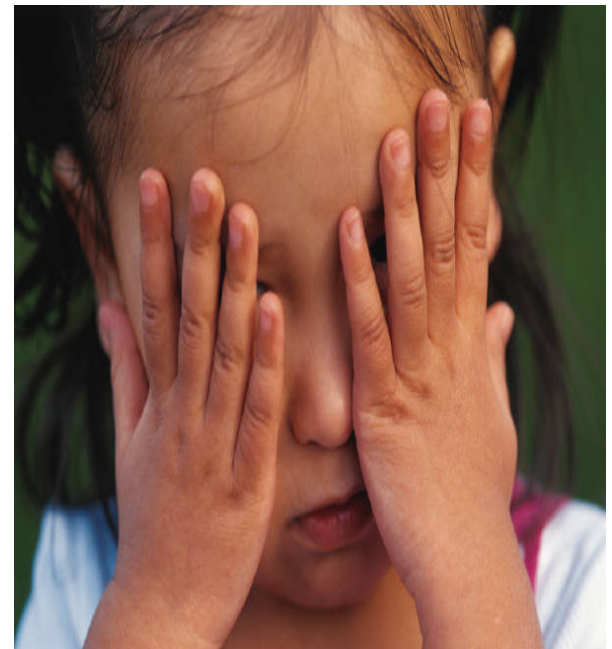
Model Calm Behavior

- Maintain level emotions and reactions with students
- Stay in the middle – no highs or lows – to help them achieve balance



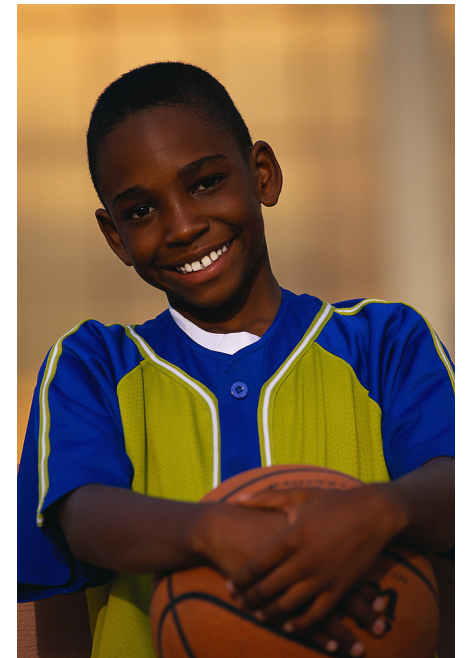
Stabilization

- If extremely agitated or losing touch with the surroundings:
- Ask them to listen to and look at you
- Speak softly and calmly
- Orient to surroundings
- Talk about aspect of the situation that is under their control, hopeful, or positive



Extra Understanding and Patience

- BUT...Educators and school staff should maintain their expectations for behavior and performance and should not be afraid of using discipline.
- At the same time, however, they should be prepared to provide extra support and encouragement.



*SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION:
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FUNCTION

FUNCTION

CONNECT

What Survivors Need:

Social supports/keeping family together
Reuniting separated loved ones
Connection to disaster recovery services,
medical care, work, school, vital services

What To Do:

Keep survivor families intact.
Reunite separated loved ones.
Reunite parents with children.
Connect survivors to available supports.
Connect to disaster relief services, medical care.

Connect with Support System

- Attend to children who are separated from their parents/caregivers
- Connect with friends and pets



Connect at School

- Check in with them on a regular basis
- Encourage interaction, activities, team project with friends and teachers
- Keep track of and comment on what's going on in their lives
- Share positive feedback



*SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION:
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ACTION

ACTION

EDUCATE

EMPOWER

What Survivors Need:

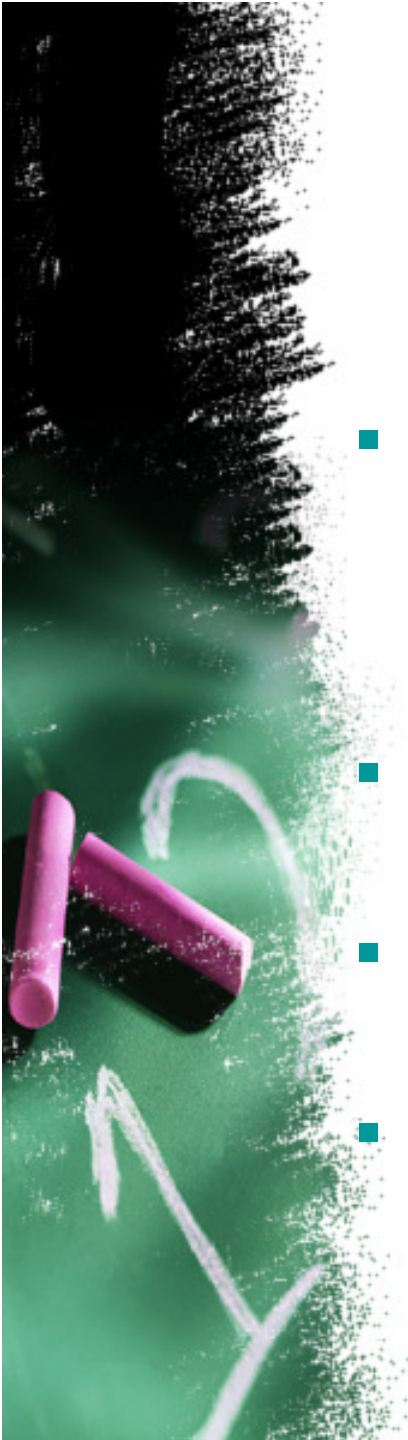
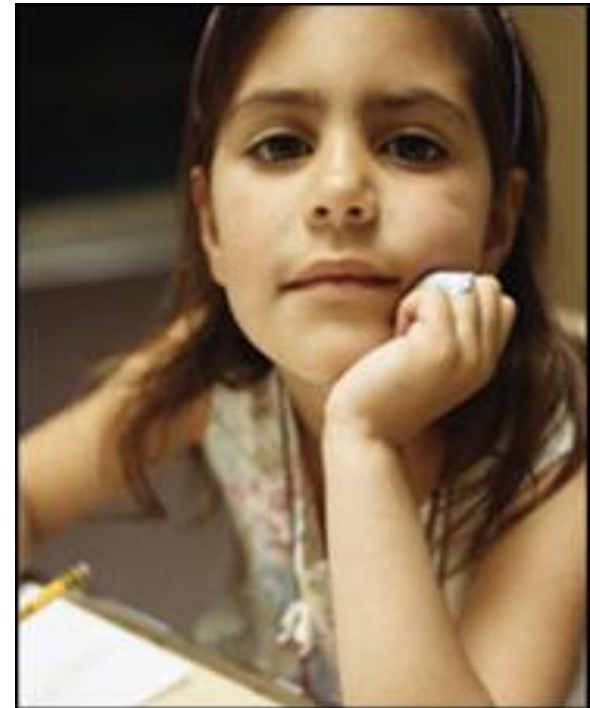
Information about the disaster
Practical first steps and “do-able” tasks
Support to resume normal activities
Opportunities to help others

What To Do:

Clarify disaster information:
Provide guidance about what to do.
Identify available resources.
Identify steps for resuming normal activities.
Engage able survivors in helping tasks
Teach Resilience

Practical Assistance

- Offer practical assistance and information to address students' immediate needs and concerns.
- Identify the most immediate needs.
- Discuss an action response.
- Act to address the need.



Teach About Normal Symptoms and How to Cope

- Talk with children about their physical and emotional reactions
- Provide basic information on ways of coping
- Teach simple relaxation techniques (3x3x3)
- Employ “Grounding”



Linkage with Collaborative Services

- Links students with needed in-school services, and inform them about services that may be needed now and in the future.
- Provide direct links to additional needed services
- Promote continuity in helping relationships



Restore the Learning Environment

- Act to re-establish a sense of emotional safety
- Return the school to calm routine/schedule
- Support the emotional stabilization of teachers and parents



Help students to begin to problem solve

- How can the student go to school everyday?
- How can the student stay in school everyday?
- How can the student do well in school?



Compassion Fatigue

“There is a cost to caring. We professionals who are paid to listen to the stories of fear, pain, and suffering of others may feel, ourselves, similar fear, pain and suffering because we care.”

“Compassion fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to working with the suffering, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events.”

Charles R. Figley, Ph.D.



Building Responder Resilience

- **Pre-event**
 - Educate and train
 - Build social support systems
 - Instill sense of mission & purpose
 - Create Family communications plan
- **Response**
 - If possible, deploy as a team or use the “buddy system”
 - Focus on immediate tasks at hand
 - Monitor occupational safety, health, and psychological well-being (individual & team)



Building Responder Resilience

continued

- Get to know your limits...”
- Activate Family (social support) communications plan
- **Post-event (Recovery)**
 - Monitor health and well-being*
 - Delayed reactions with increased demand for services seen in general public and emergency responders (onset >5 weeks later)
 - Give yourself time to recover
 - Seek support when needed

SAFETY, FUNCTION, ACTION: *Psychological First Aid for Disaster Survivors*

SAFETY

SAFEGUARD

Goal: **SAFEGUARD** survivors from harm and offer protection.

SUSTAIN

Goal: **SUSTAIN** survivors by providing basic needs.

FUNCTION

COMFORT

Goal: **COMFORT** support, validate, and orient distressed survivors.

CONNECT

Goal: **CONNECT** survivors to family, friends, and social supports,

ACTION

EDUCATE

Goal: **EDUCATE** and inform survivors about the disaster, available options for action, and resources for support.

EMPOWER

Goal: **EMPOWER** survivors to take first steps toward disaster recovery and foster self-efficacy and resilience.

Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide

- http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/manuals/smallerPFA_2ndEditionwithappendices.pdf

NCCTS
The National Center
for Child Traumatic Stress
TERRORISM AND DISASTER BRANCH



PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

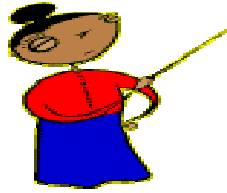
Field Operations Guide

Terrorism and Disaster Branch
National Child Traumatic Stress Network

National Center for PTSD

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This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, opinions, and content of this field operations guide are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.



Resources for Parents & Teachers

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
- Red Cross “Masters of Disasters” curriculum
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) “Facing Fear” program
- Courage to Care www.couragetocareforme.org
- U.S. Department of Education
- Minnesota Department of Public Safety
- Minnesota Department of Education
- Minnesota Department of Health





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