

Implementing a Continuum of Tiered Behavioral Health Supports for Students, Families and Staff following a Natural Disaster

Natural disasters, including floods, tornadoes, and wildfires, can be devastating for communities, impacting students, families and staff. It is helpful for students to be able to return to the routine of school as quickly as possible, but even so, it may feel anything but routine. Students may be displaced, grieving, anxious, or sad. Students, families and staff who have experienced other types of loss or trauma – other natural disasters, child maltreatment, out of home care, substance abuse in the family, motor vehicle accidents, etc. – may be particularly vulnerable to strong emotional responses to the natural disaster. Responses will vary and may appear immediately after the event, or be delayed.

Schools are an important support in promoting community recovery in a number of ways:

- Schools provide an opportunity to return to a familiar routine
- Schools are a place of physical and psychological safety in community
- Schools can educate students, families and staff about the normal range of responses to trauma, and teach healthy and constructive coping strategies
- Schools are often the most important observers of change in youth, and can identify and provide early intervention for behavioral health concerns
- Schools are key in promoting well-being and resilience in youth through school connectedness, peer relationships, building competence and self-efficacy, and promoting self-esteem
- Schools offer ample opportunities for healthy relationships – the key to recovery from trauma

Schools should assume that all students, families and staff will benefit from support, resources and awareness about how to cope with the effects of the natural disaster. Thus, Tier 1 universal activities are critical and should be prioritized for all students, families and staff across the school community. Those persons and families in need of additional resources are much more likely to be identified in a culture of open discussion and acknowledgement of the potential negative effects of the natural disaster. Universal activities should reach all students, but are best delivered at the classroom level rather than through all-school assemblies.

Addressing grief through memorials for students or staff who died as a result of the natural disaster can be difficult. It may be preferable for schools to allow community groups to host such events, and excuse students to attend, rather than making them a school-sponsored activity. This enables school to remain a psychologically safe space, minimizing the potential for it to become a trauma reminder. Desks and personal items of students or staff who have moved, or died, may be moved to reduce the potential for constant triggering. However, when references to those lost friends and staff occur, they should be honored, remembered and seen as an opportunity to support students in learning to cope with feelings of grief.

The following list provides some ideas for implementing a tiered response as you return to school following a natural disaster. Use this in conjunction with your school/district Emergency Operations Plan and Trauma-Informed Plan.

Tier	Population	Goal	Activity	Example/Resources	Responsible Staff
Universal	All students & families	Provide a sense of safety, reduce anxiety Important Note: <i>universal reassurance and information must occur at the classroom level and not at an all-school assembly; students need a smaller environment in which they can ask questions, be heard, and be reassured by an adult they know and with whom they have a relationship. These conversations may have to occur multiple times.</i>	Acknowledge the event and provide clear facts, clarify misinformation through written, virtual, online and in-person messaging: “There was a [type of natural disaster], and this is what we know about the impact....” (avoid any speculation, if you aren’t sure, don’t mention it, reiterate “this is what we know at this time”). Reassure students, families & staff about safety plans: “We know what to do”. Reassure students that the adults in the building are there to help them. Create or utilize calm down/quiet/peace corners in classrooms: bean bag chair, books, papers & drawing materials, soft music, manipulatives, stuffed animals, etc.	Principal or superintendent email, letter or video to families. Bus driver greeting students; Principal greeting students at school entrance at start of day; Teachers greeting students as they enter classroom; any staff saying “good-bye, see you tomorrow” at dismissal. Class discussion in every classroom to acknowledge what’s happened, provide facts, establish a safe place, remind them “I’m here to help and take care of you.” See NCTSN resource for Teachers. See a description of calm down spaces here.	All school staff as appropriate to their daily interactions with students. Classroom discussions on the first few days back to school should be led by the classroom teacher and a mental health staff-person (School Counselor, School Social Worker or Behavioral Health Provider). Teachers must remain present in the classroom and actively participate in these discussions.
Universal	All students & families	Normalize the psychosocial responses to the event.	Provide information that we may have lots of different responses to this event, they are all okay: anxiety, sadness, depression, fear, physical symptoms, changes in sleep, appetite, poor concentration, poor memory, tearfulness, anger, hyperactivity, etc.	Information sheets & conversations with students, staff & families. See National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) resources for young	School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists, FRYSC staff, School Nurses, Teachers, Admin, BH Providers

Tier	Population	Goal	Activity	Example/Resources	Responsible Staff
				children , children , teens & parents .	
Universal	All students & families	Teach & practice coping strategies for managing feelings of anxiety, etc.	Integrate breathing, grounding, mindfulness strategies into daily routines.	Start class with a breathing or grounding activity; here are some examples . Try mindfulness resources from Edutopia .	Teachers primarily, but all staff should know – including instructional aides, bus drivers, etc.
Universal	All students & families	Provide information about when & where to seek additional resources if needed.	Discuss signs & symptoms that it may be good to talk to someone individually	Informational resources disseminated and posted to be publicly available.	FRYSCs, School Counselors, School Psychologists, School Social Workers & School Nurses may be leads.
Universal	All students & families	Provide a sense of agency to help others.	Help students find things they can do to help themselves. Help students, families & staff find ways to comfort and support one another: this can be helpful to combat the feelings of helplessness if the school community has lost people to death, injury or having to move.	NCTSN has resources for children and teens . Draw pictures, make cards, host a fundraiser, collect needed items.	
Universal	Staff	Normalize psychosocial responses; support staff coping strategies.	Check-in with staff, model vulnerability. Allow real time support for teachers who may need a short break to regroup during the day.	Start staff meeting with a check-in or grounding activity Tap In Tap Out	Principal, Superintendent, with support from School Counselors, School Psychologists or Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Tier	Population	Goal	Activity	Example/Resources	Responsible Staff
Targeted	Students exhibiting signs of severe or persistent BH concerns; <i>Students who may have had recent losses or trauma exposure in the past may have more pronounced responses.</i>	Check-in, reassure, regulate, refer & connect.	Pro-actively and regularly check-in with students you know have been struggling or who have had direct impacts (loss of family, friends, home, etc.).	An informal check-in may be, “Hi, good to see you. How are you today?” from any staff. A formal check-in may be an adaptation of Check In/ Check Out that addresses emotional well-being with an assigned trusted adult in the school.	All staff: Teacher, Bus Driver, Instructional Aide, School Counselor, FRYSC staff, School Nurse, School Social Worker, School Psychologist, Food Services Staff, Administrative Assistants, SRO, Principal
Targeted	Students	Check-in, reassure, regulate, refer & connect	Reassure: remind students who appear to be struggling that school is safe, there are people to help, create a non-punitive, psychologically safe environment; engender a sense of hope e.g. “I know you are feeling really overwhelmed and I am here to help. We will find ways to help you feel better.”	From the NCTSN: Helping Youth after Community Trauma	All staff
Targeted	Students	Check-in, reassure, regulate, refer & connect.	Regulate: help students calm down using breathing, grounding, distraction and other self-regulation tools.	Develop a trauma-informed safety plan for student to use to self-regulate if they become distressed at school	All staff

Tier	Population	Goal	Activity	Example/Resources	Responsible Staff
Targeted	Students	Check-in, reassure, regulate, refer & connect	Refer: know your school & community BH resources to be able to make referrals; assist with making calls to inform parents & connect them to BH providers & other resources	State Provider Directory CMHC Contact & Regional Crisis Lines Regional Community Mental Health Center Map	All staff
Targeted	Families most directly impacted or with histories of loss or trauma & exhibiting needs	Reassure, regulate, refer & connect	Assist families in understanding when additional assistance is indicated; make sure families have information about available resources; assist families in accessing those resources; engender hope that things will get better.	List of available local resources; assist in setting up appointments	School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists, FRYSC staff, School Nurses
Targeted	Staff more directly impacted or with histories of loss or trauma & exhibiting need for support	Reassure, regulate, refer & connect	Acknowledge the stress on staff; normalize psychosocial responses staff may be experiencing to the event & its impact on students; know how staff can access EAP and other behavioral health supports in the community.	NCTSN Self Care for Educators	
Intensive	Students exhibiting symptoms of traumatic stress or impeded functioning	Refer and support them with needed accommodations	Refer to community behavioral health providers; consider temporary accommodations for academic, attendance & psychosocial expectations; consider 504 Plan as needed.	State Provider Directory Regional Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) Map CMHC Contact & Regional Crisis Lines	School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists, FRYSC staff, School Nurses

Tier	Population	Goal	Activity	Example/Resources	Responsible Staff
Intensive	Families exhibiting persistent difficulties functioning	Refer and connect to community behavioral health and social services.	Refer to community behavioral health providers and other social service and disaster relief providers.	State Provider Directory Regional Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) Map CMHC Contact & Regional Crisis Lines	School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists, FRYSC staff, School Nurses
Intensive	Staff exhibiting persistent symptoms or impeded functioning	Refer and connect to behavioral health, social service and disaster response providers.	Refer and connect to EAP and other supports.	Send out information about EAP in emails; Post information about EAP in Staff Lounges, Bathrooms, above copy machines & other heavily trafficked places.	District & School Administration
Intensive	Staff experiencing primary or secondary traumatic stress responses	Work with staff who are distressed to manage time off and recovery to prevent worsening of traumatic stress response.	Support time off as needed; avoid punitive responses or making people feel guilty for taking care of their needs.	Redeployment of central office district staff to assist in schools if needed.	Principals, District CO Staff

Additional Resources:

- Kentucky Department for Education
 - [Understanding Trauma and Traumatic Stress](#)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Disasters Resource Page](#)
- [Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child-Serving Professionals](#)
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
 - [Helping Students After a Disaster](#)
 - [Restoring a Sense of Well-Being in Children After a Traumatic Event: Tips for Parents, Caregivers and Professionals](#)
 - [Restoring a Sense of Well-Being in Children After a Disaster](#)
 - [Restoring a Sense of Well-being in Children After a Disaster En Espanol](#)
- University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children [Well@Work](#) Resources for Staff