Student Perpetrators of School Violence—Brief Facts and Tips

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Acts of violence at school, especially school shootings that involve fatalities, are perhaps the most potentially traumatic crises that schools can experience. How school communities process and respond to such violence can be influenced by whether the perpetrator was a stranger, a known adult, or a former or current student. Below are some considerations that go beyond standard crisis response and recovery interventions and procedures that may be helpful when the perpetrator is a current student at the school.

- One of the most challenging aspects of student perpetrated school violence is the impact the incident can have on perceptions of safety and security at school. Students may begin to question the ability of the adults to keep them safe, as well as the potential for violence from their other peers. Helpful strategies include:
  a. Have increased security and adult presence at the school in the days and weeks after the crisis.
  b. Ensure that there are safe and anonymous ways for students to report threats, concerns, and information they have regarding potential violence and ensuring that students are aware of these procedures. Fear of retribution can prevent some students from coming forth with information.
  c. Explain to the students that a safety/crisis plan is in place and providing concrete examples of the steps that school personnel are taking to ensure/increase safety and security.
  d. Provide opportunities for students to discuss their feelings and concerns with a trusted adult or school employed mental health professional.

- Friends of the perpetrator often struggle with the fact that someone they knew and cared about did something so terrible. Empathy and acknowledgement of both their feelings and the fact that they may feel quite conflicted can be helpful. Let them know that it’s okay to still love the person, have conflicting emotions about the individual, or grieve their loss.

- Friends of the perpetrator may need a safe space where they can process their feelings and experiences. They may also feel isolated and become the targets of other students’ anger. Having qualified school employed mental health professionals available to conduct group crisis intervention and group counseling with these peers can provide them with an opportunity to share with others who have similar concerns. These interventions can be especially helpful with naturally occurring groups (e.g., if the perpetrator was on the swim team, a group can be done with the other swim team members).

- Emphasize tolerance among the students, staff, and parents for the different levels of emotions and different expressions of grief. These types of incidences can increase the likelihood of community divisions, so it is especially important to attend to conversations and activities that bring a community together.
Once school resumes, it can be incredibly helpful to have a mental health professional or crisis responder available to follow the class schedules of both the perpetrator and the victim(s) for a few days. This allows for group interventions and processing and is a nice way to provide support to classmates who saw these individuals every day, as well as to address the apparent absence of the student.

While supporting the student body following a student-perpetrated act of school violence is obviously a priority, it is important to remember that the adults in the school community will also be affected. It is especially vital to consider the needs of teachers, coaches, counselors, and other individuals who may have had a close relationship with the student or the victims of the violence. These individuals may have similar feelings and issues as the perpetrator’s friends and may need some time and additional support to address their grief and trauma. In addition, as students and staff reflect on the tragedy, some may feel a sense of guilt in the belief that they missed signs of depression or mental illness in the perpetrator. They will need support in processing those feelings.

Finally, keep in mind that with time, the school community will heal. Remind each other that things will get better and celebrate the school’s spirit and resilience.

REFERENCE


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