Is It a Crisis?

Knowing what constitutes a crisis and how to determine an appropriate response will help schools and students recover.

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Every day, middle and high schools open their doors to millions of students. And as every principal knows, every day brings the potential for the unexpected, including problems that can be solved through straightforward decision making and administrative action and crises that can require significant and intensive response. Principal leadership is essential to both. The challenge is being able to quickly and accurately distinguish what is a crisis, what kind of crisis it is, and what is the appropriate response.

Defining Characteristics

Before considering specific crisis response strategies, school administrators must understand the essential characteristics of a crisis event; what kinds of situations school crisis teams must strive to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from; and what situations require which specific interventions. The physical aspects of crises are often obvious, particularly if they involve human injury or death. The psychological aspects of a crisis can be equally significant and sometimes more widespread, yet they are harder to identify and often overlooked. In fact, the risks for psychological trauma that can interfere with individuals’ coping abilities often constitute the greatest need after physical safety is restored and throughout the recovery period.

Specifically, Brock (2002) characterizes the types of events that may require a school crisis response as extremely negative, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. The first and perhaps most fundamental characteristic of a crisis event is that it is perceived as being extremely negative (Carlson, 1997). Crises generate extreme physical or emotional pain or are viewed as having the potential to cause such.

The second characteristic is that those events generate feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and entrapment (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). People who have lived through a crisis often feel as if they have lost control over their lives. The degree to which an event generates those feelings has a significant effect on how the event is perceived. For example, students who have not received earthquake preparedness training will likely feel more powerless and experience an earthquake as being more frightening than students with such training.

Finally, crisis events typically occur suddenly, unexpectedly, and without...
warning. A key factor that makes the event traumatic is the relative lack of time to adjust or adapt to crisis-generated problems (Carlson, 1997). This can undermine natural coping or problem-solving reactions and exacerbate feelings of helplessness.

Both events described in the opening scenario qualify as extremely negative for the people involved and almost certainly would cause them emotional or psychological pain. They also might generate a sense of powerlessness. But the students dealing drugs caused the events leading up to their arrest, which was predictable. There is no physical harm or loss of life. Threat perceptions are likely to be low, even if those involved are under stress. If, on the other hand, police officers had fired their weapons when making the arrests and students arriving at school had witnessed it, the risk for trauma increases. For the student on life support, his family, friends, and teachers had no warning; may feel helpless to change the outcome; and face the potential of an extremely painful loss. An important question for school leaders to answer in this case is how wide this circle is likely to be and what variables might escalate their reactions.

Looking at the Variables
Not all crisis events have the same traumatic potential. The scope and scale of a crisis, the extent of harm caused, its degree of violence, the disruption to normalcy, and the real or perceived loss all shape the traumatic impact. Obtaining an accurate estimate of the required level of crisis response is important because of the dangers associated with both over- and underreacting to a crisis event. Unnecessarily extreme adult reactions to a crisis can increase students’ threat perceptions and associated risk for psychological injury. On the other hand, underreacting may result in not meeting students’ needs and wasting valuable resources.

Knowledge of the traumatic potential of crisis events (the “crisis event variables”) is essential, given that different combinations of those variables will call for different levels of crisis response. The type of event can affect trauma risk. In general, human-caused events (in particular, those that involve personal assault by someone who is familiar) are more distressing than are accidents or natural disasters or acts of God (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). But natural disasters that occur unexpectedly, result in multiple fatalities and severe property destruction, are associated with longer crisis event exposure, or involve exposure to gruesome details can be highly traumatic.

In addition, people have their own sets of variables that will put them at greater risk for trauma reaction, such as:

- Physical proximity: the closer to the crisis event an individual is physically located, the greater the risk for psychological trauma (and conversely, the greater the distance, the lower the risk)
- Emotional proximity: individuals who have or had close relationships with victims of a crisis have a greater risk of trauma
- Internal personal vulnerability: having an avoidance coping style, poor self-regulation of emotion, or a history of mental illness or psychological trauma increases the risk of trauma
- External personal vulnerabilities: having poor family resources, being socially isolated, or having a perceived lack of social support all increase the risk of trauma
- Threat perceptions: adult reactions are an important influence on children’s perception of risk and hence trauma risk.

The Level of Crisis Response
There are four levels of school crisis response, as suggested by the National Association of School Psychologist’s PREPaRE Model of Crisis Response. The first level entails minimal response and is used when crisis events are not highly traumatic (i.e., the coping challenges for students and staff members are not significant). First-level crises can be managed using available school resources without personnel leaving their traditional school roles (i.e., there is no need for school crisis team members to clear their calendars). Crisis events that might require this level of response include nonfatal accidental injuries that are not considered to be human caused or intentionally inflicted. Events of this type can have a real
Matching Level of Crisis Response With Crisis Event Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Event Example</th>
<th>Estimated Crisis Response Level</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>Predictability</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student falls and breaks leg on playground while playing kickball</td>
<td>Minimal Crisis response</td>
<td>Accident (not human caused)</td>
<td>Nonfatal injury</td>
<td>School staff expect playground accidents</td>
<td>Minutes</td>
<td>Others see the student falling and crying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rain causes local flooding and damages playground equipment, one classroom; no injuries</td>
<td>Building Crisis response</td>
<td>Natural disaster (an “act of God”)</td>
<td>No fatalities or injuries</td>
<td>Flooding was forecast 2 days in advance</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>Students see the damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A gang fight takes place off campus and involves students at your school</td>
<td>District Crisis response</td>
<td>Human caused (violent assault)</td>
<td>One fatal injury</td>
<td>Students predicted the fight</td>
<td>Minutes</td>
<td>No students witnessed the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A gunman attacks on a crowded playground; some students are in lockdown all day</td>
<td>Community/Regional Crisis response</td>
<td>Human caused (violent assault)</td>
<td>Multiple fatalities</td>
<td>Sudden and unexpected</td>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>Students are exposed to gruesome sights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


impact on the people directly involved but are not likely to significantly adversely affect many school community members, making the need for crisis response minimal.

The second level of crisis response is building level. Although the crisis event is potentially traumatic, available school resources can manage the crisis. When responding to the event, team members are required to leave their traditional roles (i.e., to clear their calendars). Crisis events that might require this level of response include nonfatal accidental injuries that are human caused or the result of natural disasters that are not associated with fatalities or long-term coping challenges. Typically, the event affects more people than just the individuals immediately involved—such as an extended circle of students or staff members who are connected to the event who might need supports—but the entire school community is not deeply engaged. The death of a student or a staff member often requires this level of intervention. How wide the circle is and how broad and intensive the response needs to be will depend on how well-known and popular the student or staff member was and the cause and unpredictability of the death.

The third and fourth levels of school crisis response are district level and regional level. Whether a response is district or regional level is determined by the availability of local resources. For example, a small school district with relatively few crisis team members would need support from a regional response much sooner than a larger school district would.

Third- and fourth-level crisis events have the potential to be highly traumatic, and not only are building-level personnel required to leave their traditional roles but the number of school community members affected will likely overwhelm building-level crisis resources as well. The school will need to call in resources and crisis intervenors. Crisis events that might require this level of response typically include those that are caused by human aggression, have one or more fatalities or significant property destruction, occur with relatively little warning, present ongoing coping challenges for a relatively long period of time, or result in exposure to intense crisis images and actions. Events of this type are likely to have adversely affected a large number of school community members; therefore the need for crisis response is significant—and for some schools and in some situations, it is overwhelming.
The majority of individuals experiencing a crisis will recover to pre-crisis psychological health levels.

**Conclusion**

Thankfully, the majority of principals will not have to guide their school communities through a crisis that requires a community or regional response. But virtually every principal will face multiple crises throughout his or her career that warrant a minimal or building-level response. The foundational principles and constructs for effective crisis management are same in all cases. Knowing the characteristics of a crisis and how to assess the level of response needed, being prepared and having a plan and crisis team in place, knowing how to access additional resources, and responding in the appropriate manner can significantly shape the outcome that a crisis will have on the school and the community.

**REFERENCES**