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Crisis management in education

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Crisis management in education

Abstract

A crisis management team and crisis management plan is essential when a traumatic event or crisis occurs. The roles of professionals, including superintendent, principal, school counselor, and teacher should be outlined within the crisis management plan. A crisis management team helps the school community remain calm and exert appropriate activities. A crisis management plan allows the crisis management team to effectively help students, faculty and staff, and the community.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

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by

Jamie L. Cusick

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Abstract

A crisis management team and crisis management plan is essential when a traumatic event or crisis occurs. The roles of professionals, including superintendent, principal, school counselor, and teacher should be outlined within the crisis management plan. A crisis management team helps the school community remain calm and exert appropriate activities. A crisis management plan allows the crisis management team to effectively help students, faculty and staff, and the community.

A school shooting has taken place in the local high school. Is there a crisis response team or crisis management plan? What are the roles and responsibilities of school personnel? In the wake of an unimaginable event, school personnel need to be prepared to handle a crisis or traumatic event.

Without a crisis management plan, schools may find it hard to effectively respond to students, faculty and staff, and the community. In the aftermath of a traumatic event, a school proves value to the development of a crisis management plan. The U.S.

Department of Education (n.d.) states:

By developing a step-by-step plan that clarifies tasks to be performed before, during and after a crisis, school and school districts can capitalize on the strengths of both professionals and volunteers rather than spending time directly after an incident creating protocols and procedures from scratch (p. 8).

Cobia and Henderson (2003) state an effective plan cannot be developed in the midst of a crisis. An appropriate response is based on a previously developed plan. A comprehensive school crisis intervention plan includes a crisis management team outlining the role of professionals. The crisis management team should include administration, social services, and management (Basham, 2000). A crisis management plan will allow school personnel to respond effectively and immediately. A crisis intervention plan should incorporate the 3 R's: readiness, response, and recovery (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

A majority of a traumatic event is the recovery process, which may take days, months, or years. How students recover from a crisis may be determined by how well

professionals respond to the traumatic event. Therefore, a crisis management plan allows school personnel to effectively respond to students' needs in a time of crisis.

Definition

Crisis

Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency (n.d.) defines a crisis as a state of emotional turmoil consisting of four characteristics including: (a) suddenness; (b) failure of the normal method of coping with stress; (c) short in duration; and (d) have potential to produce self-destructing behavior. Roaten (2007) identifies four main categories of crises including: developmental, situational, existential, and environmental. Developmental crises occur naturally in human development producing stress, such as a pregnancy or death in the family. A situational crisis is unpredictable and out of a person's control. A school disaster is considered a situational crisis. Going to college or conflicts questioning the meaning of life are existential crises. Environmental crises or natural disasters include hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, or fires.

Traumatic Event

A traumatic event is experienced as a threat to one's safety and causes physical, emotional, and psychological distress (MedlinePlus, n.d., Traumatic events). Events such as school shootings or a death of a teacher or student may be classified as a traumatic event. These traumatic events can cause high anxiety long after the event is experienced, and these emotions can lead to post-traumatic stress. Post-traumatic stress occurs after a traumatic event where threat of injury or death was present (Medline Plus, n.d., Post-traumatic stress).

Crisis Management Team

Basham (2000) states the crisis management team “is the first to meet in response to a crisis event” (§ 13). It should represent administration, social services, and management (Basham, 2000). According to U.S. Department of Education (2006), the responsibilities of the crisis management team include dispelling rumors, supporting the main office, offering tools and resources to address student needs, providing counseling, coordinating volunteers, and helping teachers restore the learning environment.

A designated location should be set in advance for the crisis team to meet.

Basham (2000) suggests the assistant principal’s office. Once the meeting is called, the crisis management team, as a group, should make decisions as quickly as possible (Roaten, 2007). A list of emergency telephone numbers should be available upon a crisis. Basham (2000) suggests the following emergency contacts: the police, fire department, district security, the media, student services, superintendent, and child protective services.

The Mississippi Bend AEA (n.d.) suggests seven steps that should be carried out by the crisis management team and principal. The first step is to call for a mandatory all-staff meeting before school. Staff should be informed of a crisis event through a calling tree designed at the beginning of the school year. In step two, the principal should inform the staff of the crisis management team leader who will be assisting in staff activities. Next, the principal and crisis management team leader inform the staff of their expectations. It should be discussed that any staff member that feels he/she is not capable of addressing the topic to the students, inform the principal immediately. In this case, a crisis management team member will be assigned to this particular classroom.

Addressing specifically what will be announced to the students is step four. If possible, provide a written statement for staff to read to the students. The fifth step is to tell staff that all media requests should be redirected to the media spokesperson. During step six, announce a mandatory all-staff meeting after school to discuss the day's activities and concerns. Addressing staff's questions and requests is the seventh and final step.

Role and Responsibilities of School Professionals

Superintendent

The Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency (n.d.) suggests the superintendent publicly show support for school intervention in a crisis situation, respond quickly to the needs of the school principal, address media needs, and communicate with district personnel and school board. It is important that the superintendent ask for requests of the principal. It is also suggest that the superintendent monitor the intervention process.

Principal

The principal should be the first school personnel informed of the crisis. Once informed, it is important to verify the facts of the crisis information. If there is a death, the principal should confirm the deceased individual by checking with the police or the correct authorities. Next, the principal should assess the severity of the crisis and the impact it may have on the school community. When appropriate, he/she should contact the crisis management team and appoint a crisis team management leader. If the event occurred outside of school hours, the team may meet early the following school day to discuss their action plans (Mississippi Bend AEA, n.d.).

One person should be appointed spokesperson for the school and in some cases, this may be the principal. He/she acts as the media person or liaison between outside

sources (Mississippi Bend AEA, n.d.). Therefore, one consistent figure is addressing the concerns of the community and hearing one message.

Counselor

Counselors play a vital role in the crisis management team and in the crisis management plan. The Mississippi Bend AEA (n.d.) suggests that counselors provide individual and group counseling after gathering information about students and staff's reactions. They should also pay attention to students who are high-risk and assess their needs. These needs may include individual counseling, group counseling, and/or referral to outside agencies. The school counselor may be the direct service provider to students and staff (Poland, 2007). Parents may need information regarding their son/daughter's expected responses after a crisis (Baggerly, 2007).

Counselors also play an integral role in the recovery process. Coordinating grief counselors, debriefing students and staff, and providing support groups are part of the counselor's role after a traumatic event (Riley, 2000). Follow-up with students is essential and can be accomplished through teacher referrals.

Teacher

Part of a teacher's job is to work with students during stressful and emotional situations (Allen & Ashbaker, 2004). Teachers work directly with students and therefore play a vital role in their recovery from a crisis. Students will inform teachers when they are ready to get back to their regular classes (Poland, 2007). All teachers should determine if the class is ready to move on to subject matter or if talking about the crisis is more important. If students are not ready to continue with their regular classes, Brock (1998) suggests a classroom crisis intervention model where students are able to debrief

the traumatic event. This model consists of six steps: (a) introduction; (b) providing facts; (c) sharing stories; (d) sharing reactions; (e) empowerment; and (f) closure. Poland (2007) states that if normal teaching can not be done, the crisis becomes the curriculum.

In some cases, the teacher may need to find a replacement or a support person for him and her and for the class and to console students. Allow students to express their feelings and fears about the situation. At this developmental age, adolescents want to grieve, but fear what their peers will think of them (Kandt, 1994). Students need to be reassured he/she will be cared for and loved (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). Teachers should recognize students who are extremely distraught. Students who seem at high-risk should be guided to the counseling office.

Crisis Management Plan

It is better to be prepared for the unthinkable than to develop a plan as the crisis unfolds. Trump (2007) states “parents will forgive school officials if test scores drop, but they are much less forgiving if something happens to their children that could have been prevented or better managed, especially when it comes to school crises” (p. 33). Not only should a crisis plan be in place, it should be practiced. As a result, school personnel are less anxious and better prepared to handle a traumatic event.

Training

Black (2004) suggests that policies should incorporate all aspects of crisis management including rehearsal drills in the community, district, and school buildings. Teachers are less concerned with students’ psychological needs because of academic standards. Training teachers on ways to respond and comfort students is important in order to lessen the anxiety amongst the school community. When training teachers,

Basham (2000) suggests maintaining a sense of control, assessing needs, giving support, reducing lethality, and linking individuals to helpful resources as main goals.

Training teachers how to react to a student's grief is also essential. Although adolescents tend to gravitate towards their peers, it is important to provide a sense of connectedness, support, discipline, and structure (Grollman, 1996). Many teachers may not know how to respond effectively to students. The Cedar Valley Hospice (1997) suggests using the correct terminology, being a good listener, and accepting the student's feelings about the crisis. The Mississippi Bend AEA (n.d.) suggests using simple questions, simple suggestions, and simple comments. Allow for students to express their feelings of dependency, encourage discussion, correct any distortions, and realize the lack of life experience in handling trauma (Thompson, 1990). Teachers should be trained on students' typical responses physiologically, cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, and spiritually (Baggerly 2007).

Not all students will grieve the same, and teachers must be aware of students who are high-risk and in need of special attention. Mississippi Bend AEA (n.d.) describes problematic expressions of grief as acting out, self pity, and freezing. Self pity is a normal part of grieving, but may cause one to become angry. If a person freezes or has no affectual response, it may be serious. In these cases, extra help from a counselor or crisis management team member is essential.

Procedure

Once a school is informed of a crisis or traumatic event, the principal should check its severity. A severity measurement tool should be implemented in order to carry out the crisis plan. Then, the principal alerts the crisis management team who meets

before a mandatory all-staff meeting. In this meeting, the team and the principal assess the situation and plan accordingly. After the plan is reviewed, the crisis management team addresses school personnel informing them of the procedure and their duties. Remind the staff that resources are available, such as grief information sheets and the counseling office.

The school day should be followed by a mandatory all-staff meeting, when school personnel may review the day's events. The crisis management team should allow for feedback, answer questions, and review the next day's activities (Mississippi Bend AEA, n.d.).

Debriefing

Basham (2000) believes it is important to allow time to debrief with students and staff members once the incident is over. In order to clarify the crisis events and outcome, the principal should write a memo to read to staff members at the end of the day. During the debriefing time, the team may review what did and did not work. Thus, it allows the team to update and design new assignments and interventions.

Not only will school personnel need debriefing, the crisis management team will need help. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) suggests informal debriefings and counseling as ways to help the crisis management team. Due to helping others, team members may delay their own reactions to the crisis. Allowing time for the crisis management team to debrief provides an opportunity for members to express their personal reactions and gain support (Basham, 2000).

Communication

In the event of a crisis, communication is essential. School personnel, students, and the community will be concerned. In order to keep everyone informed, a clear communication system must be established. How to get in touch with faculty, who talks to the media, and how to keep teachers informed are communication questions that must be addressed.

Telephone tree. A telephone tree should be designed at the beginning of the school year in case of emergencies. This phone tree can be utilized in the event of a crisis also. It is a quick way to reach all school personnel to schedule important mandatory meetings held by the crisis management team and principal.

Media spokesperson. During a crisis event, information can be transmitted through the media. It is important that the media have correct information. Therefore, designating a media spokesperson helps address any false accusations that may arise. School personnel and students should be advised not to talk with the media. Rather, they should direct the media towards the designated spokesperson.

E-mail. In order to reach faculty members throughout the day, Poland (2007) suggests sending an email and announcing that all staff must regularly check their computers for updates. Crisis management team members may also keep faculty updated on suggestions for classroom interventions and allows for distribution of helpful resources.

Maintaining preparedness

A crisis management plan ensures a more comprehensive approach. It is valuable for increasing understanding and addressing both single- and mass-casualty incidents

(U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Crises may represent danger, but it is also an opportunity for growth (Roaten, 2007). In the aftermath of a traumatic event and debriefing of students and staff, the crisis management plan should be reviewed and revised. Therefore, in the future, faculty and staff are well-prepared and less anxious to handle a traumatic event or crisis. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) suggests developing a crisis handbook, training for the crisis team, creating memoranda, documenting needs, tasks and responses, and organizing support for school personnel.

Aftermath

Counselor's Role

Counselors play an important role in the recovery of the school community, including students, parents, faculty and staff, and the community. The school counselor must be an advocate for all groups and be equipped with necessary resources. Students should be provided with individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance. The school counselor should keep communication with parents and provide them with appropriate sources regarding the developmental grief stages of their adolescent. Teachers may ask the counselor for advice on students' behaviors and the counselor needs to be available to provide appropriate resources and support. In order to help alleviate the stress of the crisis, the counselor should work with the community and its resources. It is also important to note that the school counselor is part of the school community and must take care of him/her self (Riley, 2000).

Students who are at the highest risk are those who were close to the traumatic event. An example may have been the death of a close friend. School counselors must identify the students who are most affected by the crisis and find appropriate help for

these individuals. It is important for counselors to help those in need, but also to recognize when outside resources must be utilized (Poland, 2007).

Recovery is defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) as restoring students' social and emotional equilibrium. Not only does the school counselor need to provide resources for teachers to help aid these students back to their academic studies, but also needs to provide further counseling options. Students may participate in individual or group counseling, classroom guidance, and in some cases referred to outside sources, such as a mental health clinic. Through the following strategies, the school counselor can help staff and displaced students achieve academic, career and social success (Baggerly, 2007).

Individual counseling. Through individual counseling, students may express their feelings with the school counselor. Roaten (2007) suggests helping students comprehend and express their feelings. The counselor can help normalize those feelings. Some students may not be able to verbally express their feelings. In this case, other therapies may be useful, such as art therapy, play therapy, or sand tray. The school counselor can aid in establishing internal school supports, such as mentors. Individual counseling should be continued for several months. "After students begin to deal with their feelings, then school counselors can help them begin to take action" (p. 14).

Expressive therapies are found to be very effective when working with students after a traumatic event. Examples include play therapy, sand tray therapy, art therapy, puppetry, and bibliotherapy. Expressive therapies allow students to express their feelings in a non-verbal and non-threatening way. Another effective therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy where one goal is to prevent further suffering (Roaten, 2007).

Group counseling. If there is an overabundance of students needing counseling, group counseling is an option. Through referrals from teachers and self-referrals, the counselor may set up grief counseling groups. Grief counseling groups can help ease anxiety, share keepsakes of the event, retell stories, and set goals (Kandt, 1994).

Numerous issues may be brought up during the group counseling sessions. Helping students express their feelings is an essential part of the group experience. Kandt (1994) suggests drawing a family tree, designing a memory book, a balloon lift, and journaling as specific ideas to use when working with grief groups.

The Mississippi Bend AEA (n.d.) suggests co-facilitating grief counseling groups. It is critical in maintaining continuity. Also with more than one facilitator, it helps to recognize students who are high-risk. In some cases, these students may need to be removed from the group to seek outside counseling help.

Classroom guidance. Classroom guidance is an effective way to reach all students. Brock (1998) believes it helps students understand the trauma, express feelings and thoughts, and learn coping skills. Teaching body relaxation and deep breathing, identifying misunderstandings regarding crisis, and reassuring their safety, and developing a strong social support group are key elements when helping kids in the classroom. Thus, counselors should be conscious of cultural and developmentally appropriate interventions (Baggerly, 2007).

Classroom guidance provides a great opportunity for teachers and counselors to dispel rumors. Students may be confused because of misled information (Brock, 1998). When talking to students about the crisis, it is important to use the correct terminology and the truth (Cedar Valley Hospice, n.d.). Furthermore, given the circumstances of the

crisis, it may be appropriate to educate students about the trauma. For example, if a student passes away due to an illness, teachers and the school counselor may need to educate students about the illness.

Referrals. Students who are experiencing lasting symptoms should be referred to outside counseling. Typically, these are the students who were in close proximity to the crisis (Poland, 2007). Students in need of outside resources may be showing signs of complicated grief which include chronic hostility, loss of appetite, persistent panic, or withdrawal from friends (Cedar Valley Hospice, n.d.). In some cases, an outside agency may be essential for students to help them maintain a long-term mental health (Roaten, 2007).

Resource. Counselors should provide information for parents regarding their son/daughter's reactions to a traumatic event (Baggerly, 2007). Handouts highlighting appropriate grieving patterns versus unhealthy grieving and basic interventions are essential. Also, helpful ways to talk with an adolescent may benefit parents of a grieving child.

Not only is the school counselor a resource for parents, but a resource for the school community. Faculty and staff may consult about students and appropriate interventions. The school counselor should help school personnel in the best ways they see fit.

Prevention. Although the traumatic event has passed, it is still important to take preventative measures to ensure the event does not happen again. Counselors can teach coping skills, problem-solving, conflict mediation, assertive skills, and stress management in the classroom. Other preparations include: talking about crises, modeling

positive responses, help students establish an emergency plan, and creating an effective crisis management plan (Roaten, 2007).

Follow-up

In the event of a crisis, there is an opportunity to inquire for help, but after the brunt of the event, it may seem that there is no help. School counselors should follow up periodically with students. It is important to remember some problems may not show up until months after the crisis and some students may develop post-traumatic stress. It is also important to be an advocate for students who have been displaced (Roaten, 2007). They may need further attention and outside resources.

Anniversaries and special occasions should be given special attention. Even if students do not mention the loss, they may be remembering the event without letting anyone know (Lovre, 2007). It is common for students to do something in memory of the event. On the anniversary or special occasion of the crisis, an appropriate anniversary activity may be planned, but it should benefit the living (Poland, 2007). The crisis management team and/or students may brainstorm appropriate ways to remember the event, such as moment of silence, an appropriate event, or a memorial (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Conclusion

A crisis situation can happen when a school least expects it. Although it has long-lasting effects on a school community, some of the trauma may be lessened by implementing a crisis management team with a plan. A crisis management plan decreases anxiety amongst the school community. It allows faculty and staff to respond effectively in a time of crisis.

School personnel play a vital role in helping the school community cope with a crisis. It helps decrease the amount of anxiety, stress, and fear. Without a crisis plan, schools may find it hard to effectively address the situation and cope. When the unthinkable arrives, it is better to be prepared than to be unprepared. In order for school personnel to be prepared, there must be a crisis management plan in place. Crisis plans addressing violence should be an integral part of the school's crisis management plan (Alexander, 2002).

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