

Psychological First Aid

School Resources to Support Military-Connected Students is a project by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness an applied research center at The Pennsylvania State University and is funded by the Department of Defense Education Activity Grant number HE1254-19-0009.

For more information on these resources click on the links below:

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/>

<https://www.psu.edu/>

<https://dodeagrants.org/>

Our goal is to provide school personnel with free, evidence-based resources to support military-connected students. This training is part of our Suicide Prevention series.

Important Reminders

Before starting this training, please read the items below carefully and check the box in front of each item to indicate your understanding.

- The following content discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some individuals.
- Follow all district, local, state, and federal regulations. This training is **NOT** intended to replace or override existing procedures or laws.

Introduction

What is the purpose of this training?

The physical and psychological safety of students and adults is paramount in trauma- informed schools. One integral resource in these schools is Psychological First Aid (PFA). The goal of PFA is to help students and adults return to and stay in school, as well as resume teaching and learning.

Objective

The goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Reduce initial distress as a result of a traumatic event experienced by students or other student personnel.

How confident are you in your ability to do this now?

Please click on the link below to submit your response.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gp3iBHLvhcTluR?modulenumber=suicide32

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below before proceeding with this training.

Answered the survey question in the link.

Clicked the arrow underneath the survey question to submit your response.

Recorded the ID number provided after you submitted your answer to the survey question. You will need it to complete the survey at the end of this training.

Research

What is most important for me to know?

Psychological first aid is a crisis response strategy that has five steps designed for the reduction of initial distress experienced by students or adults. Here are the steps:

Step 1: Listen

Students should know that you are a safe person with whom to discuss experiences and express feelings of worry, anxiety, fears, and safety concerns. When something big happens for a student, ask a question to open the floor for them to talk (and for you to listen), such as “where were you when this happened?” or “what do you remember about that day?” Respond encouragingly, avoid judgements, and don’t make predictions (such as “it will change soon”). Try to show interest, empathy, and let students know that school is a safe place.

Step 2: Protect

Help students feel protected by continuing to listen to their concerns. Talk to them about what is being done in the school and community to keep them safe. Students who have experienced trauma in particular benefit from structure and predictability, so keep schedules and establish routines. Also try to make sure your curriculum is sensitive- avoid content that might retraumatize students or include trigger warnings and alternative assignments. Treat students’ concerns with respect and discreetly provide supports.

Step 3: Connect

For people who experience trauma, one of the most common symptoms is social withdrawal- this can happen consciously or unconsciously as an attempt to keep oneself safe from relational stresses or additional trauma. School personnel can work to restore normal social relationships by reaching out regularly to check in or just say hi, or by encouraging students to join activities or interact with other students. School adults might ask “what could (I/your teachers/your family/your friends) do to help you right now?”, encouraging students to think about their social relationships. Establishing open communication between care providers and parents is also essential.

Step 4: Model

Students learn self-management skills by watching adults, so make sure that you are demonstrating the use of coping skills and an optimistic attitude, showing students that it is possible to feel afraid, stressed out, sad, and so forth, and still take positive steps in life. It is important to remain calm in stressful situations (or at least demonstrate coping skills), express positive thoughts about the future, and help students problem solve everyday stressors (coming up with strategies, coping skills) so that they learn that obstacles are manageable.

Step 5: Teach

Students should have some understanding about stress reactions- school counselors and school psychologists can handle this psychoeducational piece. Other school professionals, like teachers, can focus on teaching smaller skills, like relaxation breathing and skills for focus and organization. Also make sure that all students are aware of safety procedures and ways to stay safe at school, which can help build students’ resiliency and sense of preparedness.

Application

How might this look in my professional practice?

Remember that the goal of this training is to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Reduce initial distress as a result of a traumatic event experienced by students or other student personnel.

In the activity below, you will be provided examples of the psychological first aid steps and must identify which of the five steps it is an example of.

There was a recent wildfire that affected some students and families in the school- 30 homes were affected, but over 100 families were forced to evacuate in preparation. Knowing this, an earth science teacher decides to modify her curriculum to include more information on recovery after wildfires instead of presenting the material she had last year- segments from a documentary about a fire that engulfed a town. She still taught a lesson about wildfires and fire prevention, but added more material about how people can protect their homes from fire, how nature responds and heals from fire, and how people heal from natural disasters, and gave a trigger warning for this lesson, letting students know that they were welcome to go to the library to complete an alternative activity if they so wished.

Which of the five steps is being practiced here?

- a) Listen
- b) Protect
- c) Connect
- d) Model
- e) Teach

Correct answer: b) Protect

During a thunderstorm, a branch falls from a tree and breaks the window of a classroom. No students are physically harmed, but the loud noise, broken glass, and rain pouring inside are quite alarming. The classroom teacher calmly gets the attention of her students, asks if everyone is okay, closes the blinds to prevent as much rain from getting in, has the students line up, and leads them to the auditorium. On the way, she stops into the office to tell the secretary what happened and let them know where their class would be heading. Once in the auditorium, the teacher lets students know that she is confident that the window will be fixed within the week, but in the meantime, they can enjoy the change of pace.

Which of the five steps is being practiced here?

- a) Listen
- b) Protect
- c) Connect
- d) Model
- e) Teach

Correct answer: d) Model

After there was a secure in place lockdown because an unknown person was seen trying to enter the school, a teacher invites the school counselor to talk to his class about common stress reactions. The school counselor normalizes strong emotions during stress events, talks about how some people will recover quickly while others might have lasting feelings or somatic problems, presents several coping skills for relaxation, and shares what the school is doing to make sure students are safe.

Which of the five steps is being practiced here?

- a) Listen
- b) Protect
- c) Connect
- d) Model
- e) Teach

Correct answer: e) Teach

A school counselor keeps a list of students in her care who she considers to be medium risk and makes sure to check in with them at least once every week, even if this means just catching them in the hallway in between classes and asking them how their softball game went. For the handful of high risk students, each student is asked to stop and talk to a specified adult at a specific time each day to give an update about their functioning- for example, one student visits the school nurse for 5 minutes after lunch each day to talk about their progress on one of their goals. The nurse helps with goal setting, offers encouragement or advice, give compliments, and listens empathetically to the student's struggles.

Which of the five steps is being practiced here?

- a) Listen
- b) Protect
- c) Connect
- d) Model
- e) Teach

Correct answer: c) Connect

A teacher finds out that one of his student's fathers who works in the Navy is about to be deployed for 9 months. When the rest of the class is working on an assignment, the teacher quietly asks the student to join him in the hallway. Outside, the teacher says "hey, I heard from your mom that your dad is getting deployed. Do you want to talk about that?"

Which of the five steps is being practiced here?

- a) Listen
- b) Protect
- c) Connect
- d) Model
- e) Teach

Correct answer: a) Listen

Implementation

How can I effectively implement this content in my professional practice?

Please review the considerations below regarding potential implementation strategies, barriers to implementation, and collaboration strategies related to this content. This will help you coordinate the next steps as you begin to incorporate the information presented in this training into your professional practice.

This information can also be found on a handout that you will be able to download at the end of this training.

Implementation Strategies

- From Trauma Aware Schools: "School counselors, psychologists and social workers can teach PFA in schools effectively generally within an hour to school staffs as part of the training for the recovery phase of school emergency management. The training should touch briefly on the history and rationale for PFA, underscoring the fact that children and adolescents are far more vulnerable to traumatic stress, anxiety, fear and confusion than adults are after crises or disasters. In addition, the training must address adult reluctance to intervene or even to speak with child or adolescent survivors of crises or disasters because of common feelings that *"I don't know what to say and I'm afraid I'll make it worse."* The training should conclude with a review of the five phases of PFA for students and teachers: Listen, Protect, Connect, Model and Teach, including how to implement these phases and ideas for teaching basic coping skills to students."

http://traumaawareschools.org/resources-materials/3162/PFA%2BLPC%2BUS%2BDept%2Bof%2BEd%2B%2BREMS%2BHH_Vol3Issue3.pdf?1387376371

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation

- Support for teachers and other professionals is critical when helping them to feel empowered to be supportive during crisis situations. Ongoing coaching and check-ins are important.
- Support from leadership is critical as all members of the school community must value, learn, practice and implement such strategies for maximum effectiveness.

Collaboration Strategies

- Identify persons who can serve to follow-up with teachers and staff on a regular basis regarding overcoming trauma and crisis in schools.
- Regularly review crisis procedures to support confidence in the event of a crisis.

Resources

Are there any resources available to help me implement this content?

Click on the link below to download a tool that you can use to implement this content in your professional practice.

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:bc8c124c-4c05-4a2d-84a5-628e313c40a5>

Below you can find other supplemental materials that may be helpful for you in your professional practice.

https://rems.ed.gov/docs/HH_Vol3Issue3.pdf

https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/documents/files/PFA_SchoolCrisis.pdf

Feedback

How can I help improve this training?

The objective of this training was to increase your confidence in your ability to:

Reduce initial distress as a result of a traumatic event experienced by students or other student personnel.

Answer the questions in the link below to let us know how well this training increased your confidence in your ability to accomplish this objective. Once you have answered all of the questions, click the blue arrow button underneath to submit your responses.

https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d771mLr9ZgW3kyx?modulenumber=suicide32

Verify that you have completed each of the tasks below.

Answered all of the survey questions above. You may have to scroll to see all of the questions.

Clicked the arrow underneath the last survey question to submit your responses.

Additional Readings

Where can I learn more about this content?

The following resources were used to create this training. If you would like more information about the information presented in this training, we encourage you to start here.

Cowan, K. C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Pollitt, K. (2013). A framework for safe and successful schools [Brief]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

TSA: Resources for trauma-informed schools and traumatic situations. (n.d.). Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://traumaawareschools.org/tsaResources/resourcecenter?t=pfa%E2%80%94>

Thank You!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this training. If you have any questions or comments, please email us at schoolresources@psu.edu.

Proceed to the next training

Click on the link below to move on to the next training titled *Suicide Contagion and Suicide on School Property*. In this training, you will increase your confidence in your ability to respond appropriately to the possible outcomes on the suicide risk screening tool.

https://learning.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/school-resources/modules/suicide_33-suicide-contagion-and-suicide-on-school-property_201022/

Return to the module directory

Click on the link below to return to the module directory.

<https://schoolresources.militaryfamilies.psu.edu/modules/>