

## Five Phases of Psychological First Aid, by Marleen Wong

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### Phase 1 of 5: Listen

Psychological First Aid is an intervention strategy that we have developed specifically for schools. There are many models of Psychological First Aid, and back in 1954 there was an international organization that said some kind of immediate assistance needed to be provided to people who had survived an incident of mass violence, a natural disaster, or some personal crisis or experience of trauma.

And we have found in the Los Angeles Unified School District, where we have had crisis teams since 1987, that psychological first aid is really the intervention that has been so helpful to support the children who have experienced some act of violence, whether it's a shooting, a gang attack, earthquake. So either a mass event or a school wide event, it is has helped children to process their thoughts and feelings and to return them to the classroom in an improved mental and social state more ready to learn.

Psychological first aid--Listen, Protect, Connect, Model, and Teach--;is comprised of five phases, and we developed it using skill sets that are very natural to teachers, especially teachers who are psychologically minded. Because every day they can look at their students, and the good ones can tell something's happening with you today that's different. Something is upsetting you. Tell me about it.

And that willingness to take some time to listen to the child's story is a very powerful intervention in and of itself, because the child realizes that there's an acknowledgment that something is different and something is a problem.

### Phase 2 of 5: Protect

Safety is always an issue after an experience with trauma, and people don't feel as safe as they did either emotionally or physically, and the most common reaction is, *It's going to happen again*, and in fact children and adults are always on guard for that particular experience to happen again. So if it's a tornado, and it starts to rain, *Is that going to happen again?* If it's an earthquake, and there's an aftershock, *Is the earthquake going to happen again?* Or if it's a gang attack, the fear is, *When I walk to school will it happen again?* It's very specific to the individual's experience.

So the second phase is protect. How do we protect the child after we've listened to what they said, so that we can acknowledge that this is indeed a fearful thing? And we will do all we can to protect them.

But one of the things that's very important is that they must return to school and resume their normal schedule as soon as possible. Because normal routine, however difficult that might feel, is really the precursor to more rapid recovery psychologically and in every other way.

### Phase 3 of 5: Connect

The third is connect. So I still am a consultant to the U.S. Department of Education and was a consultant to many of the school shootings, and sometimes I would speak with teachers--not many but a few--who

would say, "I can't talk to these students. I don't know what to say. I wasn't trained, and I'm afraid I'll make it worse."

And what we've learned is that students want to be asked. So contrary to the sense that teachers have that I'll make it worse, if they truly are concerned about these students and really ask and are willing to listen--"What has happened to you? How are you doing?"--that is such an important part. That reconnection, that re-establishment of empathic bonds, eliminates the child's sense of isolation because often they suffer silently.

They don't know what to say. They don't how to open the topic. It's really that they just don't know what next steps should be, and it's the important adults in their lives that can reach out to them, and I emphasize the action of reaching out and connecting.

So it's not just saying, "Tell me about what happened," but after you hear what the experience is, looking for the student every day and being able to say, "Hello, I'm happy to see you. I'm so glad you're at school. How are you doing in your class? I know you've had problems in math. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Just that reinforcement is so important, and it brings the child back into the circle of the school family, and it reestablishes that connection. And as we know from the resilience studies, that connection with one adult outside of the family in schools is a powerful predictor for school achievement, for lack of school failure, for good attendance, for graduation, for all of those good things that they need to achieve. So listen, protect, connect and then model calm behavior.

#### **Phase 4 of 5: Model**

I was looking at a re-broadcast of David Letterman and his first show after the terrorist attacks in New York. And, of course, he was expressing the dismay, his upset, the upset of all New Yorkers, and he said, "But the one person who taught us how to move forward in this was Giuliani," and it was because of the way he behaved, his calm resolve, his courage. The way that he acted in the face of the unknown and of this terrible tragedy was an inspiration.

And with his example we got through it, and he said, "And I'm proud to be a New Yorker," and that's what we mean by modeling calm and optimistic behavior. It's not that we're saying, "Oh, everything's going to be great," but it's the whole idea that we have realistic optimism. That we believe in our students, in our colleagues, in our school, in our community. That we're going to figure it out. We may not know the answer, but we will figure it out.

#### **Phase 5 of 5: Teach**

And then the last is listen, protect, connect, model, and teach is that every tragedy, every crisis is an opportunity to teach children about the normal reactions after a traumatic event. That their physical symptom, such as inability to sleep, or their anxiety when they hear something that reminds them of the experience, such as a loud thunderclap, a rain after a tornado, that their changes in their ability to pay attention school, their emotional kind of roller coaster of being upset when people talk about it or when

they see things that remind them of the tragedy, that all of those things are at their height in the immediate days and perhaps week after the actual event but that subsides over time.

And these are normal reactions, and that they are not going crazy because a lot of children who experience trauma, if they are not taught about what those symptoms are and the normal trajectory and course of those experiences are, feel as if they are going crazy, and that they are the only ones who are experiencing that.

That's what psychological first aid is about, those five steps, and we find that once teachers are able to follow them, they can use them at any time. It could be a child comes off a playground, and he's had a fight with someone, and it reminds him often of what happened at home perhaps. It gives teachers a strategy and some tools that they can use to help the child to process and then to teach them coping skills as well as perhaps new ways in which they can problem solve about a disturbing experience.

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