Talking about traumatic events [1]

Hello Alice,

I am a high school instructor and many of my health students are expressing many of the varied emotional responses to the recent "acts of war on America." Do you have any suggestions for how to have classroom discussions about the events and their feelings about it?

Respectfully,
Allen

Answer

Dear Allen,

In many cases, educators like yourself play more than just the role of teacher and the concern you show for your students is laudable. When facing issues such as terrorism, allowing students to express their feelings and to hear those of others may offer an opportunity for them to address the fear, anger, sadness, and potential range of other emotions s/he may be experiencing. The way you facilitate this in a classroom setting, though, depends on a variety of factors and may first be authorized by a school administrator.

Individual age, maturity, cultural background, as well as the severity and proximity of traumatic events may affect how people respond to and process them. When starting discussions about such events, keep in mind the spectrum of reactions that may be represented among your students. Reactions may include, but are not limited to:

- Regression in behavior (engaging in behaviors or habits typical of children)
- Increased fear, anxiety, and/or aggression
- Decreased concentration and academic performance

List adapted from the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress [2].

One way to spark this conversation is to simply ask what your students have heard or what they think about the events that have occurred. From there, the use of probing questions ("How did that make you feel?", "Why do you think you felt that way?") may allow them to explore their emotional reactions to the events. You could also nest this conversation within a larger discussion of values, such as tolerance, non-violence, and cultural diversity. As a health educator, you could lead into this discussion by incorporating activities that get students...
talking about how medicine, gender, and sex are viewed in different parts of the world and how those views are part of a greater definition of culture that is often at the heart of global conflicts.

Your role in all of this may be a supportive moderator, keeping in mind that some students may not want to talk about these issues. If extreme emotions arise, try to address them by modeling a level-headed, non-critical reaction without minimizing students' feelings. As an authority figure, by offering honest information, a listening ear, and acknowledgment of their emotions, you may be able to help your students process the trauma of these events. However, if you notice students are having a difficult time managing or overcoming their emotions, they may benefit from seeing a counselor at their school or another facility. Keeping an eye out for that and offering a list of resources for students (i.e., contact information for a school therapist) could be a great way to conclude your discussions. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress also has a suggested set of guidelines on how to discuss traumatic events in a school setting [3]. You might also find tips on the American Academy of Pediatrics [4] or the American Psychiatric Association [5] websites to be helpful.

In starting these discussions, you're offering a valuable experience for your students, but make sure you don't neglect yourself in the process. Providers experience much of the same angst and may equally benefit from social support, which may allow them to better provide that support for others. Although family, friends, and colleagues may play a major role in how we deal with these situations, sometimes people need professional help to work through their feelings. Students may find talking to a trusted counselor, or mental health professional may be helpful. Students can get a referral for mental health care through their health care provider.

Again, your concern for your students' well-being is commendable, and hopefully with these tips, you will be able to help them air some of the emotions riled up by these events. Best of luck!

Alice!
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