



Compassion Fatigue In Trying Times

School counselors and psychologists who minister to those affected by trauma need to guard against the twin possibilities of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. The cumulative effect of listening to several trauma victims' experiences can become a psychological burden for the mental health worker. Psychological trauma specialist, and frequent DoDEA guest speaker, Marleen Wong, Ph.D., offers a description of the symptoms and suggests ways to understand and avoid this phenomenon.

According to Dr. Wong, "cumulative stress means one thing piles up on another." Vicarious trauma means that care givers can eventually become traumatized by listening to repeated tales of suffering from the victims they are helping. Dr. Wong describes three stages of stress: mild, pronounced, and severe. According to Dr. Wong, care-givers will exhibit the following warning signs as their psychological stress increases:

- ▶ Personality changes – Normally positive people appear grumpy.
- ▶ Health changes – Sleeping patterns become disrupted, health deteriorates.
- ▶ Relationship changes – Individual begins quarrelling with spouse/colleagues.
- ▶ Performance changes – Eventually the stress affects work performance.



Watch Dr. Wong in the DoDEA [Chat Room](#).

To avoid this stress, maintain professional distance and plan activities that provide "care to the caregiver." As a veteran of numerous efforts to assist disaster victims, Dr. Wong cautions, "Don't download it into your soul." Instead, Dr. Wong recommends caregivers use the following "ABCs" to manage their exposure to trauma:

Awareness – Attunement to needs, limits, emotions and resources.

Balance – Plan time away from the psychological battlefield for enjoyable activities.

Connections – "Use a defusing partner to vent," or participate in planned psychological debriefings.

Developing a comprehensive crisis response plan includes establishing a trauma-sensitive culture. By working together, administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors can plan activities and procedures to help care givers avoid the risk of absorbing stress vicariously from the victims. This, in turn, reduces compassion fatigue among caregivers while enabling them to be more responsive to the needs of students. ■

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Leadership Perspective on Crisis Management

Mr. Michael Gould, Superintendent of the New York, Virginia, Puerto Rico district, recently shared his insight into the value of Crisis Management Planning. He should know. On October 22, 2009, Gould was awakened by an explosion of fuel tanks at a nearby petroleum facility while he was visiting DoDEA schools in Puerto Rico.

“Any event like that is initially very disorienting,” said Gould. However, he added that the recovery efforts were aided by excellent support from the military command and a team of engineers who were sent by DDESS to help identify what repairs needed to be made to reopen schools. As a result, Fort Buchanan schools were able to resume class within eleven days of the incident.



Wreckage of fuel tanks near Fort Buchanan.

Gould observed that some of the physical security measures that had been put in place over the years worked well. “The blast fragmentation film on the windows would have helped protect people,” Gould observed. “But more importantly, not only would our buildings have held up well, our people would have held up exceptionally well.” Gould said that the administrators and crisis management teams had prepared and practiced their response protocols extensively. He noted that although it is tough to predict the type of incident, this experience confirmed that the time invested conducting drills and exercises was well spent.

Gould also described how security planning and preparedness benefits parents. “Parents bringing their first child to the school as a kindergartner are looking for reassurance that the school will take care of their child.” He added that when parents see tangible examples of the thought and effort that DoDEA invests in planning for contingencies, they feel more confident that the school has the situation under control. “Parents do not need to know all of the details of the plan,” said Gould, “they just need to see that there is a plan in place and know that the school is prepared.” ■

Obesity and Bullying

As rates of childhood obesity continue to rise across the United States, weight is occasionally cited as a factor in bullying. A new study shows why school administrators may want to consider weight management in their roster of violence prevention programs.

The study, “School-Based Intervention on Childhood Obesity: A Meta-Analysis” published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* shows that tackling the difficult issue of obesity within the school setting may indeed be an effective option. The study contributors synthesized prior research that evaluated the effectiveness of school-based obesity prevention and management programs.

Programs included in this “meta-analysis” included approaches that addressed physical activity, diet, or both. Based on the nineteen studies that met the inclusion criteria for analysis, the researchers found strong evidence for the effectiveness of school-based obesity management programs.

Obesity education programs can help decrease a factor contributing to bullying, while simultaneously allowing the school to accomplish other health objectives. For more information, contact safeschools@csc.com. ■

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A Recipe for Writing a Letter to Parents Following a Crisis

Following a critical incident at school, parents understandably want information. The local media will ask questions. Busy administrators will be called. The two most important points to communicate to parents/sponsors are **what happened** and the **actions** the school is taking to respond.

The best antidotes to rumors are verifiable facts. A time-tested way to reassure parents is to list specific actions taken to address victims' needs. Unfortunately, some crisis management teams report that the toughest part of getting through a critical incident was crafting the letter to parents afterward. This task was made more difficult, teams say, because they had to write the letter from scratch.

To ease communication burdens, educators can use a simple "recipe" to prepare a letter to parents in advance. Keep the draft letter in the crisis management kit where it can be easily accessed. Then, when a crisis occurs, all that is necessary is the addition of the relevant facts. Follow the steps below to prepare a template which can help avoid letter-writing angst during a critical incident.

Step 1: Gather the facts. Provide a concise summary of the facts of the incident. In the absence of information, rumors will erupt. Stick to what is known. Avoid the urge to explain why things happened. Avoid mention of blame or perpetrators. Keep it simple by only offering verifiable information that has been coordinated with the District Schools Office, Public Information Officer, and emergency responders.

Step 2: Stir in a description of the actions the school has taken to respond to the incident. A generic statement such as "the school implemented the crisis response plan" is sufficient. Concentrate on actions taken to care for victims and the additional resources available to students and staff. This shows that the administration has a plan and is in control of the situation. Let parents know the school is committed to addressing the needs of students and their families.



Step 3: Add a taste of what to expect. Provide information on the normal emotional responses and signs of more severe reactions to help parents/sponsors address the emotional needs of their children. Reassure parents by noting that certain emotional responses in children are normal after a stressful incident (e.g., temporary regressive behavior such as "clinging," or seeking additional attention). Include mental health resources for families.

Step 4: Garnish with contact information. Describe how parents/sponsors will receive further updates. Offer a designated phone number and e-mail address from which parents can obtain additional information. Inform them of any other procedures in place to keep lines of communication open.

When crafting the letter, use short, declarative sentences. Take the time to run a spelling and grammar check on the document. As obvious as this may sound, presenting a professional document helps reassure readers that all is well at the school. Even if a staff member actually writes the letter, including the principal's name and signature shows parents/sponsors that the school leadership is fully committed to ensuring the security of their children.

This recipe for a letter to parents/sponsors may sound dry. Yet, during an incident, the crisis team will be glad that all they had to do was open the packet, "add water, and stir." For a copy of a generic template, contact safeschools@csc.com. For additional information refer to the DoDEA Crisis Management Guide, available online at www.dodea.edu/instruction/crisis/resources/docs/DoDEA_Crisis_Manag_Guide_07.pdf. ■

Building Peer Networks that Span the Globe

Principals often benefit from working collaboratively. They share ideas, knowledge, inspiration, and they can support one another. A recent popular trend is for principals in a given district to meet for discussion of a selected education-related text. They discuss educational concepts and learn from the experiences of one another.

This collaboration benefits school security, even if the stated purpose of the group is not security-related; when people trust one another, they are better able to listen and offer meaningful support during times of need. During a critical incident, relationships between principals are already in place and communication is likely to be more effective.



Administrators can build on the networking opportunities available through DoDEA. For example, Principals' and Assistant Principals' conferences provide an opportunity for face time among individuals who usually communicate by phone and e-mail. Maintaining those relationships is another story, thanks to the geographic realities of a world-wide school system. Following is a list of ideas DoDEA principals can use to create a strong peer network:

- ◆ Create a “working group” of professional contacts within a geographic region who keep in touch by e-mail. Stimulate electronic discussion about educational topics of local interest. These need not be DoDEA related. They can be aimed at increasing the skill set of the group. Alternatively, take turns sharing insight into school leadership.
- ◆ Consider scheduling a periodic conference call to share ideas and discuss challenges that you are all encountering.
- ◆ Share ideas and articles on school security or educational strategies. Solicit feedback from the group about key points.
- ◆ Annual principals' conferences offer a valuable opportunity to expand your peer network. While it is fun to reconnect with old friends from a former posting, to get the most out of these opportunities, meeting new people is crucial. Aim for meeting five new contacts per session. Follow up with an e-mail when back at school to keep the conversation going.
- ◆ Let new DoDEA principals know that you are involved in an information sharing program and ask them if they would like to join. They may be grateful for the networking opportunities.
- ◆ Final advice: networking is a symbiotic process. It only works when all participants contribute. Make sure that you give as much as you receive.



School security is a journey of a thousand steps. No administrator should have to travel alone. Building a network of supporters makes school leadership easier. For more networking ideas, contact safeschools@csc.com. ■

How to Teach Cyber Ethics to Students

DoDEA's mission is to "prepare students for success in a dynamic, global environment." DoDEA's second guiding principal is "trust and respect for others." At the intersection of these two concepts lies an ethical question for students navigating cyberspace: "How would you feel if someone did this to you?" Learning to ask this question is fundamental to demonstrating sensitivity and respect for others.

Educators need not be technically savvy to teach cyber ethics to students. Some vocabulary might change, but the lessons relevant to practicing ethics on the Internet are the same as in real life. Ethical behavior begins with an understanding of integrity, which is often defined as "how you behave when no one is looking."

Ideally, students will internalize the ethics and make a wise decision because it is the right thing to do, not because they fear the consequences. The five situations below all involve decisions students should make for themselves online:

Dishonesty – Discuss who is hurt if students "pretend to be someone else on line." Ask students how they would feel if someone invaded their privacy by taking over their e-mail or social networking account.

DoJ Site Teaches Online Ethics

The best way to stay out of trouble with computers is to imagine before you do something how you'd feel if someone did it to you. You wouldn't like it if someone opened your mail or looked into your bedroom windows.

- Cybercrime.gov (U.S. Department of Justice)

Plagiarism – Encourage students to imagine how they would feel if their group wrote a school play, and another group of students began to perform it. Part of respecting other people's intellectual property involves recognizing that ideas are property.

Harassment – Nobody thinks of himself or herself as a cyberbully. Teachers could acknowledge that sometimes students are tempted to denigrate others in order to "fit in" with a new crowd. Encourage students, before they send a message, to ask themselves how they would feel if someone sent that same message about them.

Threats – Students might be tempted to dismiss a threat of violence they saw online either because they do not take it seriously or the person making the threat is a friend. **Challenge students to make a personal commitment to always report threats of violence.**

Stealing – Students who would not shoplift may illegally download music for free. Invite students to identify who is harmed if student A says to student B, "You have to listen to this band's new album," and copies MP3 music files to another student's computer. Students might find it far-fetched that sharing music could put a band or musician out of business. "If they're any good," students might reason, "they can make their money playing concerts."

The best way to stimulate discussion among students is to start with topics they can relate to. For example, ask them how musicians can make a living if nobody is paying for their music. Invite students to describe how they would feel if they were a musician and could not make money because nobody was buying their CD. This might be the most complex and relevant ethical dilemma teachers can discuss with students. Because there are no easy answers to these questions, a stimulating discussion is a first step to helping students internalize these topics.

As students think through the impact of their decisions, they are more likely to behave courteously online. The U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) offers a lesson plan for teachers to use in discussing online ethics with elementary and middle school children at www.cybercrime.gov/rules/lessonplan1.htm. ■

Girls Study Group: Understanding Delinquency Among Girls

Recent studies challenge the myth that boys are more violent than girls. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) convened the Girls Study Group. This interdisciplinary group, comprised of scholars and practitioners, works collaboratively to develop an understanding of the causes and appropriate responses to girls' delinquency. The Girls Study Group includes experts from the fields of sociology, psychology, criminology, and gender studies, as well as legal practitioners and girls' program development coordinators. The research focus consists of:

- ✓ Reviewing literature on girls' delinquency, including addressing commonly held assumptions.
- ✓ Analyzing secondary data sets (otherwise known as a meta-analysis).
- ✓ Assessing programs designed to prevent female delinquency. This included reviewing risk assessment and treatment-focused instruments for delinquent girls.



DoDEA is committed to the well-being of all girls. Friendship skills are among many key factors that contribute to resiliency.

Findings of the Girls Study Group

Though delinquency may not be an issue for DoDEA, several findings might interest educators. The study looked at various aspects of the experience of teen age girls. These include comparing the rates of violence perpetrated by girls versus similar acts initiated by boys. The study found that girls, contrary to popular belief, were just as violent as boys. An additional finding of the study shows that, contrary to popular conjecture, girls are not growing more violent over time. Researchers examined FBI statistics from 1991 to 2000. They were able to dispel the notion that today's generation of girls is more violent than previous generations. The data showed that violence among girls has been mostly unchanged over time. The troubling aspect of this revelation is that girls are responsible for a higher percentage of youth crime than a generation ago. Boys' delinquency has decreased over the same period.

Forthcoming Resources for Girls

The report does not, at this time, address specific actions counselors can take to support girls. It does describe the key issues of resiliency, family support, and mental well-being as cornerstones of violence prevention among girls. The Girls Study Group also offers a basic Web site, on which the report is published. This site is managed by the Department of Justice and will be used to disseminate study information as it becomes available.

The site contains a searchable database of programs, and links to external sites featuring those programs. While no single program was found by the study to be ideal for ending violence among girls, several were found to offer positive outcomes depending on the needs of the selected group.



A volunteer works with DoDEA students in an engineering program designed especially for girls.

For more information about the Girls Study Group, visit <http://girlsstudygroup.rti.org>. To view the most recent report of the Girls Study Group, visit www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/223434.pdf. For information about programs or resources to support girls, contact safeschools@csc.com. ■