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Helping Students Cope With the Haitian Earthquake: Guidance for School Mental Health Professionals

The scale of the physical devastation and the loss of life caused by the recent earthquake in Haiti can be expected to have a range of emotional effects on children here in the United States. Most children, like most adults, will struggle to comprehend the magnitude of the tragedy but will cope well. However, exposure to the horror of the earthquake and its aftermath, provided by graphic media reports, can increase emotional proximity to this event, and consequently its emotional impact, even for children and youth not directly connected to unfolding events. Children are particularly vulnerable to such exposure.

Additionally, many schools throughout the country will be supporting students who are directly linked to the disaster because they have loved ones in Haiti who are missing, injured, dead, or struggling to survive. Most are Haitian Americans, but there were also thousands of non-Haitian Americans in Haiti at the time of the earthquake, many of whom have family here. In some cases whole communities with large populations of Haitian Americans are facing a state of uncertainty, grief, and extreme urgency to help their devastated native country. Some of these communities are likely to receive orphans rescued from Haiti who will have extreme trauma needs (and NASP plans to offer additional guidance on this topic in the coming weeks).

The following information provides an overview for school mental health professionals, who can work with other school personnel and parents to mitigate serious emotional reactions in children by being aware of risk factors, trauma symptoms, and strategies to strengthen protective factors.

RISK FACTORS

With support from parents and teachers, most students will successfully cope with this tragedy and not suffer significant emotional consequences. However, some may be at risk for more extreme reactions. The severity of these reactions will depend on a variety of factors, including:

- **Personal Circumstances**—Students who come from, or may have lost loved ones in, Haiti are an especially high-risk group.
- **Trauma History**—Children who have previously been exposed to natural disasters (especially earthquakes), have already experienced significant loss, and/or are currently coping with other critical incidents can be considered a high-risk group.
- **Excessive Media Exposure**—Otherwise unaffected students may become fearful of the earthquake following excessive exposure to graphic media reports.
- **Parents' Reactions and Family Support**—Altered family functioning, separation from parents, and ongoing parental distress and preoccupation with the earthquake are risk factors.
- **Emotional Reactivity**—Children who tend to be anxious are those most likely to display trauma reactions.
- **Mental Health**—Children who have a preexisting mental disorder, particularly an anxiety disorder, are at greater risk.
- **Coping Style**—The use of blame and anger as ways of coping may create more distress for children, and the primary use of avoidance coping strategies can predict negative mental health outcomes.

CRISIS REACTIONS

Crisis reactions will differ depending on developmental level and are generally marked by changes in typical behavior for the specific child or adolescent. Some specific reactions that may signal the need for additional support and assistance include:

- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, behavioral regression, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary School Children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, behavioral regression, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Middle and High School Youth**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

A minority of students may even be at risk for PTSD. This will primarily include children who lost significant family members or who have witnessed or experienced a severe trauma. In addition to the reactions mentioned above, symptoms of PTSD include reexperiencing the traumatizing circumstances (which can include being notified of the death of a loved one and seeing caregivers in extreme emotional pain); anticipating that the earthquake is happening again; avoiding reminders of the earthquake; general numbness to emotional topics; and increased arousal symptoms, such as inability to concentrate and startle reactions. Although rare, some adolescents may also be at increased risk of suicide if they suffer from serious mental health problems like PTSD or depression. Students who exhibit these symptoms should be referred for appropriate mental health evaluation and intervention.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE

Haiti and Cultural Implications

Haiti, a nation of 9 million people, is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, with approximately 80% of its population living in poverty and subsisting on less than \$2 a day. The population speaks Haitian Creole and the literacy rate within the country has been estimated to be about 55%. Haiti was struck in 2005 and 2008 by multiple hurricanes, which displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Even before the earthquake, less than half the people had access to clean drinking water, and malnutrition was prevalent. In addition, natural disasters typically have the greatest impact on those with the least financial resources. They have fewer resources to prevent the problems from occurring (that is, to build hurricane or earthquake resistant buildings) or to deal with tragedy after it has occurred. Current estimates place the death toll at 200,000, with 3 million people likely to need international aid for the foreseeable future. These numbers are likely to change in the coming weeks.

The people of Haiti and those of Haitian descent living with the United States are proud, resilient, and hard working. Typically, Haitians are a reserved people; they may appear not to express emotion during the crisis, even if they have suffered a great loss (although the personal grieving process can be very emotional.) Generally, Haitians will not speak unless prompted. In addition, Haitians will not necessarily seek out support but will accept it if offered. As is the case in any culture, in a crisis it is not unusual for children's emotional needs to be neglected because of the necessity of adults to take care of other competing and more pressing concerns.

Challenges for Families in the United States

One of the primary tasks for the school-based mental health professional is to help children cope with the challenges or problems generated by a crisis event. To do so, he or she must first help the student identify the specific problems generated by the crisis. It is likely that every Haitian American has been directly affected to some degree by this disaster. Students within this community will likely be dealing with a range of issues, including:

- the inability to communicate with loved ones and the corresponding inability to determine the status of friends and families
- worry and anxiety for survivors who are coping with horrific conditions (including loved ones)
- grief for loved ones who have died
- distress over identifying loved one's bodies and obtaining proper burials that provide a sense of dignity and the inability to establish a sense closure with their loved ones who have died
- a deep sense of despair over the total devastation of a home town
- for those have not traveled back to Haiti, a profound sense of loss over ever connecting to their homeland and culture
- concern about the potential for violence and significant disease and widespread health problems

- extreme frustration over not being able to do more to help
- an intense urgency to do something proactive
- parents who are immersed in their emotional reactions and attempts to cope and/or locate and help loved ones
- a strengthening or crisis of faith as they try to understand the tragedy
- a deepening sense of community and pride in being Haitian

Students who are not part of the Haitian American community but who have family members or other loved ones in Haiti may also be dealing with many of the same issues mentioned above, in addition to experiencing a sense of isolation in their distress or grief because they are not part of a larger community experiencing a similar situation.

About Earthquakes

Although most students being supported here in the United States will not have experienced the earthquake directly, some will have family members who did, and many will have seen images on television. As a mental health professional, it is helpful to understand the unique nature of earthquakes. Aftershocks differentiate earthquakes from other natural disasters and the profound devastation of the entire infrastructure, including major social institutions, differentiates the Haitian earthquake from similar disasters occurring in other regions. Since there is no clearly defined endpoint, the disruptions caused by continued tremors and devastated infrastructure may increase psychological distress. Unlike other natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes and certain types of floods), earthquakes occur with virtually no warning. This fact limits the ability of disaster victims to make the psychological adjustments that can facilitate coping. This relative lack of predictability also significantly lessens feelings of controllability. Providing students in the United States, who now appear anxious about earthquakes, with factual information about the risk they face from such a natural disaster may be indicated. To the extent these students live in earthquake prone areas, providing them with adaptive responses to this type of natural disaster has been suggested to reduce these negative feelings (as well as promoting adaptive behaviors if and when such students are confronted with the reality of an earthquake). Guidance regarding such adaptive behavior can be found on the U.S. Geological Survey website <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/prepare/>

RESPONDING TO CHILDREN PERSONALLY IMPACTED BY THE EARTHQUAKE

The following information provides guidance on how to support students who are directly connected to the earthquake. For detailed information about helping students cope with loss and grief, see [*Helping Children Cope With Death, Loss, and Grief*](#).

Recognize potential grief, anxiety, and stress. These students may be grieving for loved ones, anxious about family members who are injured or unaccounted for, or concerned about the future of family members whose communities were destroyed. In some cases, family members here may be traveling overseas to help relatives in need or perhaps to bring orphaned children from the family back to the United States. This level of distress may be very disruptive and result in inattention in class, poorer grades, changes in behavior, or even school absences. The situation may also take a good deal of time to resolve. Work with parents, teachers, and other caregivers to determine what extra support or leniency students need, and to develop a plan to help students keep up with their work.

Identify children and youth who are high risk and plan interventions. Risk factors are outlined in the above section on children's reactions. Interventions may include individual counseling, small group counseling, or family therapy. From group crisis interventions, and by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, the school crisis response team can determine which students need supportive crisis intervention and counseling services. A mechanism also needs to be in place for self-referral and parental referral of students.

Determine the needs of families. Whole families may be impacted by the crisis, and parents may have difficulty focusing on or meeting the needs of their children. Parents' adjustment is an important factor in children's adjustment, and the adjustment of the child in turn contributes to the overall adjustment of the family. As mentioned above, altered family functions, separation from parents, and ongoing parental preoccupation with the trauma are more predictive of trauma symptomatology in children than is the level of exposure. Recognizing these stressors and helping to provide or to identify family support is important to helping the children cope. Understand that displaced families may require help meeting practical needs, such as clothing, meals, and child care.

Maintain an accurate and evolving list of current community resources available to help impacted families. It is imperative to compile a list of community resources. This should include the name, telephone number, website (if available), contact person (if appropriate), a description of services, and fees if charged. Try to determine if support groups are being provided at local churches or community agencies.

Support teachers and other school staff. Provide staff members with information on the symptoms of children's stress reactions and guidance on how to handle class discussions and answer children's questions. As indicated, offer to help conduct a group discussion. Additionally, school staff members (teachers, support staff, administrators, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, secretaries, etc.) may have family members who are missing, injured, or dead in Haiti. Work with school administrators to identify and provide support for affected staff.

Provide students the opportunity to express their feelings. This could include participating in general class discussions and activities, but doing so may not be appropriate for everyone. Students should also have the opportunity to meet in small groups or individually with a school-based mental health professional as deemed necessary. Students directly impacted and/or with higher risk factors should be considered for these more targeted, professionally facilitated discussions. In some instances simply giving older students a chance to be with and comfort each other can be a powerful and important crisis intervention.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Allowing students to deal with their reactions is important, but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Regular classes, after-school activities, and friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function. Strengthening students' friendships and peer supports is important as well.

Enable students to take action. Even more than students not directly impacted, children who have suffered a loss may feel compelled to do something to make a difference. Their focus is likely to be on family as well as the larger affected community. They can help organize fundraisers within the school or at least work with classmates who are, provide information to classmates about specific community needs, write articles for the school newspaper, and more. Doing something positive and knowing that their classmates want to help as well can strengthen students' sense of hope and belonging.

Make mental health services available. Depression, anxiety, and stress are natural reactions to crisis and loss. These symptoms can emerge over time. For many immigrant families, school is the only place where they have access to mental health services. Work with the crisis team to assess students' ongoing mental health needs. Services can include group and individual counseling, referrals to community services, and a process for keeping track of students at risk. To be most effective, services must be culturally appropriate.

Understand cultural views regarding mental health. It is important that mental health professionals be aware of attitudes toward mental illness when providing assistance to Haitian American students. Some Haitian Americans may believe there is stigma associated with depression and mental illness. If the student has belief in Vodou, depression might be viewed as possession by malevolent spirits, as punishment for not honoring good protective spirits, or possibly as a hex put on by a jealous or envious individual (Colin & Paperwalla, 1996).

Understand cultural issues associated with religion and death. In general, Haitians are a deeply religious people. Even in the face of such enormous tragedy, the people of Haiti, both survivors and those here in the United States, seem to be drawing heavily on their faith and their faith communities to cope, grieve, and take action. The official state religion of Haiti is Catholicism, but Protestant missionary activity has recently increased identification with that belief system. In addition, Haiti is known for its popular religion, referred to by the outside world as Vodou. However, it is important to acknowledge that Haitian Catholics and Protestants, while they may have some belief in Vodou, might consider them demons to be avoided. While Catholics and Protestant denominations may believe in the existence of reward or punishment after death, this may not be the case for practitioners of Vodou (Countries and their Cultures, n.d.). It is not unusual for death to generate uncontrollable crying or even hysteria, and thus, these reactions should not be overly pathologized. Haitians have a deep respect for the dead, and death can mobilize the entire extended family. There are specific rituals and practices associated with burial, which makes the difficulty dealing with the deceased following the Haitian earthquake especially problematic (Colin & Paperwalla, 1996; see also [Cultural Issues in Death](#) and [Culturally Competent Crisis Response: Information for School Psychologists and Crisis Teams](#)).

Be willing to discuss the concept of death. Students may be concerned about dying or a loved one dying, given that large numbers of children are among the earthquake deaths. Talking with them is important. Outside resources can be very helpful (e.g., books geared to different ages that explore death and dying, grief and hospice organizations, or your faith community). If a child comes from a home with a resilient belief system or faith, it will likely provide a powerful source of support when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Respect cultural issues and boundaries regarding crisis and death. Many Haitian American families are part of a close-knit, often faith-based community. Determine what support system students have access to and what are appropriate forms of support from school personnel or members of the broader community. Schools may be able to help link isolated students or families to relevant cultural support systems. (See *Cultural Issues in Death and Culturally Competent Crisis Response: Information for School Psychologists and Crisis Teams*.)

Understand the grief process. Grieving is a process, not an event. Everyone grieves differently, and not all students within a developmental age group understand death in the same way or with the same feelings. A student's view of death is shaped by his or her unique view of the world and experiences. Expressions of grief include emotional shock, sorrow, withdrawal, regressive behavior, anger or acting out, and disbelief/denial. (See *Helping Children Cope with Death, Loss and Grief*.) Students should be given the opportunity to express their grief through playacting or arts and crafts (for younger children) and through art, drama, music, and writing (for older elementary children, adolescents, and youth).

Help students support their friends. Seeing a friend coping with a loss may scare or upset students who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Younger students need help understanding the concept of death and why their friend is sad. Students of any age may need help to communicate condolences or comfort messages. Help them to decide what to say and reassure them that simple expressions of sympathy and offers of support are fine. Help students anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that they understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship. Encourage them to invite their friend to do "regular" activities like going to the movies or playing sports. Spending time with friends may offer a much needed distraction and sense of normalcy.

Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Students may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions. Additionally, for students who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These students also are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.

GENERAL TIPS TO SUPPORT ALL STUDENTS

Talk to your students. Take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, emergency and public health services, and more. Allow students to discuss their feelings and concerns, and encourage questions. Even students who do not know anyone who has been hurt may experience a sense of loss or grief, feel at risk themselves, or be concerned that such major disasters can happen with little to no warning. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Being a caring listener is important. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected.

Be a good listener and observer. Let students guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the earthquake, don't dwell on it, but be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young students may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school-age youth can discuss their thoughts and feelings, although they may need you to provide an "opening" to start a conversation.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger, and disease can become overwhelming. Young students in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on TV and their personal reality. Older

students may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective. They may also prefer to ignore the news and to watch music videos or to engage in other age-appropriate activities and such a choice should be respected.

Make a concerted effort not to stereotype students or cultural groups in a negative way. Emphasize that the Haitian people are not to be blamed for the devastation that occurred. Emphasize the ingenuity, creativity, and resiliency of the citizens of Haiti. Refrain from giving any kind of religious explanation for the disaster, but instead offer support. If violence erupts in Haiti, this should be seen as the result of desperate people trying their best to get their essential needs for food, water, shelter, medical care, safety, and security met. Desperate behavior is common when people are placed in dire circumstances for any length of time after a disaster and fear there is no clear sense of hope for rescue or recovery.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. The Haitian earthquake has generated a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, nonprofit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the enormous logistical process of getting aid to the most impacted areas and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations. (Many non-Haitian Americans have been emotionally impacted by this crisis. Adults should be cognizant of their reactions and needs as we all try to deal with this profound disaster.)

Do something positive with students to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help students feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection. Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families in need within the community.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help students understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and to go on with their lives. Focus on students' own competencies in terms of their daily lives and in difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which communities or countries have recovered.

Be honest. Acknowledge your feelings about the event. Be sure your comments are age-appropriate, but even young students will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are honest. For older students in particular, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless that you cannot do more to make a difference, or even awed at the sheer power and violence of nature. Balance statements of concern with information about our own emergency preparedness and response systems here at home.

REFERENCES

Colin, J. M., & Paperwalla G. (1996). Haitians. In J. G. Lipson, S. L. Dibble, & P. A. Minarik (Eds.), *Culture & nursing care: A pocket guide* (pp. 139–154). San Francisco: UCSF Nursing Press.

Countries and their Cultures. (n.d.). *Haiti*. Retrieved January 16, 2010, from <http://www.everyculture.com/Ge-It/Haiti.html#ixzz0cosutEML>

RESOURCES

All handouts referenced above can be accessed at http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/haiti.aspx. There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with natural disasters and other crises. There are also numerous ways to donate to international relief agencies online.

- American Red Cross www.redcross.org
- Federal Emergency Management Agency <http://www.fema.gov/kids/index.htm>
- National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org
- U.S. AID Agency, www.usaid.gov
- U.S. State Department, www.state.gov
- U.S. Geological Survey <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/prepare/>

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