



Common Student Reactions & Recommended Staff Response to Homicide

Following a homicide, it is important to deal with your feelings prior to responding to the needs of students. The feelings you experience may be similar to those of students because homicide is something to which most adults are not usually exposed.

Emotion	Student Reaction	Staff Response
Shock and Denial	The sudden unexpectedness of a homicide, combined with its violent nature, may initially overwhelm students. Because of the dramatic nature of the event, some students may react in an equally dramatic way to the news; others may appear numb	Encourage students to discuss the event and their reactions to it. It is important to point out that people express grief in different ways. Validate the range of reactions students may experience.
Sadness	This reaction usually surfaces after the shock has worn off. Crying and preoccupation with talking about the victim are common.	Staff needs to be prepared for outbursts of behavior, particularly among those who had a close relationship to the deceased. Initial hysteria can be contained by a calm, and reassuring staff presence
Anxiety	Students may worry about their own safety, especially if the perpetrator has not been apprehended. Anxiety can also be generalized to worrying about the randomness of violence and personal lack of control in life	Staff should allow students to express their fears. Realistic concerns should be addressed by problem-solving ways to maximize personal safety. While more generalized anxiety should be acknowledged, it can be put into perspective by focusing on the relative infrequency of homicide and the unique characteristics of this particular situation. Providing students with the structure and control of the school schedule will also decrease anxiety.
Anger	Often, in the absence of a rational explanation for violence, blame may take the form of “blaming the victim.”	Acknowledging the anger is important. Staff should also point out that anger is one of the ways we express grief at loss. Try to direct discussion to some of the other grief feelings that might underlie the anger.
Blame	This is frequently directed at the victim, although it may also be focused at those who were supposed to keep the victim safe (especially parents, police, school).	Staff can remind students that blame is an attempt to find an explanation for a frightening event as well as a way to devise reasons that make us less vulnerable to similar occurrence
Revenge	Anger can also be transformed into the need for revenge against perpetrator (or those associated with the perpetrator).	Thinking about ways “to get even” is a method people may utilize to feel some justice for the murder. Considering ways in which justice can be served is helpful in resolution of the loss; however, insure that this preoccupation doesn’t inhibit grieving

Other Key Points to Remember:

1. Anxiety about the event can be reactivated by news coverage or television presentations about similar events.
2. Reactions, especially anxiety and anger, may be exacerbated if the crime remains unsolved.
3. A court trial, especially if it receives publicity, may cause people to relive the homicide, no matter how long ago it occurred.

Adapted from “Managing Sudden Traumatic Loss in the Schools”, M.M. Underwood and K. Dunne-Maxim.