

Supporting Students' who Share Crisis or Trauma on Along

Classroom teachers across the country have a range of experience and training in supporting students' experiencing crisis and/or trauma. Teachers should always follow their local policies and procedures when students report that they are experiencing crisis and/or trauma. **This FAQ provides teachers with supplemental guidance for how they could proceed when a student indicates that they are experiencing crisis and/or trauma.** Each student is different and how you respond to a student experiencing crisis and/or trauma should be tailored to their needs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What do I do if a student shares that they are experiencing crisis and/or trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, depression, suicidal thoughts, bully, failing a class) in a reflection?

1. **Follow local policies and procedures for how to respond when students' report that they are experiencing crisis and/or trauma.** Many schools, districts, and states have clear policies and procedures for how to respond when students report that they are experiencing crisis and/or trauma. If you are unsure about the local policies and procedures governing your work or whether they apply to a student's situation, reach out to your school administrator(s) or guidance counselor(s).
2. **Maintain the relationship.** Students experiencing crisis and/or trauma have more relationship challenges to navigate than their peers and often mistrust others for good reason. During and after times of crisis and/or trauma, it is important for teachers to express care toward and provide support to students even if they are acting out or avoiding interactions. Students often may not know how to work through these difficult experiences so it can come out in negative behavior. It can be really helpful to reframe this negative behavior as needing help rather than deviance. Guidance for maintaining the relationship when students are experiencing crisis and/or trauma is discussed further in the following section.

3. **Foster a safe and predictable environment.** The classroom environment can further support the healing of students experiencing crisis and/or trauma. Teachers can create a safe and predictable environment by:
 - a. **Engaging in positive priming.** Greet students as they enter the classroom using healthy touch (e.g., handshake or high five). Boost students' positive emotions by engaging students in escalating [brain breaks](#) (e.g., clapping games, laughter yoga) or de-escalating breaks (e.g., triangle breathing, pumping your toes inside your shoes). Support students in collaboratively celebrating their accomplishments (e.g., positively boards).
 - b. **Posting clear expectations.** Provide students with clear guidance about how they are expected to engage in the space (e.g., raising their hand, no explicit or offensive language use). Communicate clear safety procedures (e.g., where to go during a fire). Display a daily schedule and explain potential deviations when they occur.
 - c. **Easing transitions.** Let students know before you are about to transition into a new lesson or activity (e.g., provide students with a 3-minute alert that an activity is about to end).
 - d. **Providing choice.** Students experiencing crisis and/or trauma may feel like they are lacking control. Provide students with opportunities to make choices in their learning environment (e.g., choosing a book to read or an activity to engage in).

4. **Strengthen students' self-regulation skills.** Provide students with resources to support their emotional self-regulation (e.g., [mindfulness exercises](#)). Support students in practicing these skills by building activities into transition periods.

What is a supportive, appropriate way to respond to a student experiencing crisis and/or trauma?

1. **If needed, alert appropriate school personnel.** Local policies and procedures will provide guidance on the types of crisis and/or trauma that should be reported (e.g., abuse, neglect, suicidal thoughts, bullying). If you are unsure, reach out to your school administrator(s) or guidance counselor(s).

2. **Develop a plan.** Based on your relationship with the student, create an action plan for when and how to respond to the student. It may be appropriate to follow up with the student in the moment or at a later time but it is important to follow the student's lead if they do not want to talk about the crisis and/or trauma. If the student may not view you as a trusted adult, it may be appropriate to bring in another adult who the student views as trustworthy. Your response will depend on your relationship with the student.

3. **Create space.** Find a private and safe space (e.g., counseling office, private classroom) for the student to discuss their experience with a trusted adult. Check in with the student to see if they would feel comfortable talking to you alone or if they would prefer to have another student or adult with them.

4. **Remain calm.** Use verbal (e.g., using a respectful tone, lowering volume) and nonverbal cues (e.g., nodding, leaning towards the student, sitting next to the student) when communicating with the student. If needed, relax before responding by taking deep breaths counting to ten and remember that you will not be the only one that will provide support to this student during this difficult time.
5. **Be present.** Show that you are listening to the student by giving your full attention and being present with them in the moment.
6. **Provide validation.** Ensure that you correctly understand the student's emotions (e.g., "You seem frustrated right now. Is that correct?"). Assure the student that their feelings are okay (e.g., "I feel frustrated sometimes also."). Praise the student for any relaxation or coping skills that they are using (e.g., "I noticed you took deep breaths before responding, that is a great way to relax.") and thank them for trusting you enough to tell you about their situation.
7. **Assist.** If the student is in immediate danger, call 911. Support students in identifying reasonable and safe options for responding to the experience. Connect students with resources (e.g., mental health counselors, hotlines) to support their healing. This can often mean involving parents or other professionals when needed.



The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) toll-free number, 1-800-273-TALK(8255) connects the caller to a certified crisis center near where the call is placed.

Text HOME to 741741 for free, 24/7 crisis counseling through [Crisis Text Line](https://www.crisistextline.org).

[stopbullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) provides information from various government agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how you can prevent and respond to bullying.

8. **Follow up.** When appropriate, provide opportunities for students to emotionally check in with you about how they are feeling. These can be classroom-wide activities (e.g., using the [mood meter](#)) or one-on-ones.

What do I do if a student shares something inappropriate (e.g., use of inappropriate language, communicates a threat, content is sexual in nature)?

Inappropriate actions or behaviors may be an indicator that a student is experiencing crisis and/or trauma. Local policies and procedures will provide guidance on what should be reported (e.g., threats, harassment). If you are unsure, reach out to your school administrator(s) or guidance counselor(s).

In addition to the tips outlined above for responding to students experiencing crisis and/or trauma, it is helpful to support students in understanding and identifying the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ behind the inappropriate nature of the language or behavior. As an example, you may tell a student: “Using an offensive word is inappropriate because it makes people feel uncomfortable and may hurt their feelings. Because we do not want to hurt others feelings, it is important to communicate in a more positive way.”

Sources

[Supporting Students Experiencing Trauma During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators](#)

[Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma](#)