

ANNEX 4F

**National Curriculum Development in Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation
and Disaster Risk Reduction Consultancy for the Government of
St Vincent and the Grenadines**

Helping Students Recover from Disaster: A Post-Trauma Teaching and Learning Guide for Lower Secondary School Teachers

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**Sustainability Frontiers CIC, UK
6 April 2020**



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1. Introduction

Experiencing natural and human-made disasters can be very frightening even for adults. Students who have experienced a disaster can be deeply shocked, distressed and traumatized by loss of life, injuries and/or the destruction of normal life and the familiar environment. When an entire community is repeatedly affected by disasters, it further undermines their sense of security and normalcy.

Disasters can have psychosocial impacts on those who are affected. The term 'psychosocial' is a combination of the concepts of the individual 'psyche' and the 'social' community in which the person lives and interacts. Psychosocial support recognizes the importance of the social context and process in addressing the psychological impact of stressful disaster events.¹

2. Impacts of Disasters on the Wellbeing of Students

It is important for teachers to understand how students may react to disasters. See *Box 1* for common reactions amongst students to traumatic events.

Box 1: Key Characteristics of Trauma Symptoms (Lower Secondary School Level)²

Regression Phenomena

- Try to attract parents' attention
- Have reduced feelings of sympathy for their siblings
- Become unable to do things that they were previously capable of

Physiological/Somatic Responses

- Have headaches and stomach aches
- Have a reduced appetite or, conversely, overeat
- Tend to become constipated or have diarrhea
- Have itchy skin and eyes
- Have trouble sleeping (with nightmares) or conversely feel continuously drowsy and sleep too much
- Shortness of breath, palpitations, general physical weakness

Emotional Responses

- Become irritable and get angry over minor things

¹ UNESCO IIEP. (2010). *Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction*.

² DRR Manual Fiji School (undated draft); UNICEF. (2009). *The Psychosocial Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies: Teacher Training Manual*.

- Become socially withdrawn, not feeling like going out or talking to people, or playing with friends
- Tend to be depressive, grow sad and anxious and are easily moved to tears
- Exhibit anti-social behaviors (e.g. bullying)

Decrease in Cognitive Functioning

- Poor concentration, resulting in deteriorating academic performance

It is very important for teachers to recognize that all these reactions are normal features arising from abnormal and traumatic situations and events.

Trauma symptoms gradually subside in the weeks after the disaster. However, even twelve weeks after the disaster, twenty to fifty percent of students may still show signs of distress and they may continue to do so even one or two years after the disaster event. A small percentage of students may be severely affected and at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which requires professional mental health support and assistance.³

3. The Teacher's Roles in Helping with Psychosocial Recovery

Students look to significant adults, including teachers, for guidance on how to manage their reactions after a traumatic experience. When students' parents are also affected and need space to deal with disaster after effects, teachers need to enhance their pastoral care of affected students.

Key actions that can be taken by teachers to support the recovery of students are as follows⁴:

❖ *Establish a safe learning environment*

- Create a safe, fear-free and welcoming learning environment for all students, making the learning space as comfortable as possible
- Be patient and calm and provide care and provide additional consideration and attention
- Be an empathetic listener to students and reassure that their reactions are normal but nonetheless real

❖ *Establish a sense of 'normalcy'*

³ Ehrenreich, J. (2001). *Coping with Disasters: A Guidebook to Psychosocial Intervention*; UNESCO IIEP. *Ibid.*

⁴ Ministry of Education (Fiji) & UNICEF. (2016). *Helping Students Recover from Cyclone Winston*; NASP (undated). *School Safety and Crisis*; Selby, D. & Kagawa, F. (2014). *Disaster Risk Reduction Education Toolkit*.

- Re-establish 'normal' routines (e.g. go to school; do sporting activities; engage in hobbies)
- Don't start with a full, normal academic program immediately after a disaster. Temporarily reduce expectations on school performance to give students 'breathing space'

❖ ***Install a sense of hope for the future***

- Emphasize school and community efforts to clean up and rebuild
- Encourage active involvement in rehabilitation and recovery efforts at home, at school and amongst the community
- Rehearse safety measures as a precaution and reassurance against future trauma
- Help students identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope with being upset or distraught

❖ ***Create opportunities to express feelings and thoughts about the disaster experience***

- Encourage sharing and discussion of hazard and disaster experiences, thoughts and feelings with their peers (and significant others)
- Encourage students to articulate feelings of grief, pain and loss through multiple media
- Use activities and methods that help students express themselves through sports, drama, dance, music, drawing, writing
- Ensure that sharing of experience is done voluntarily without any forcing of or pressure on those who do not wish to talk to do so
- If students are severely affected, ask a school counselor or mental health professional to facilitate occasional class discussions and offer additional mental health support and guidance

4. Post-Disaster Coping Activities

4.1. Post-disaster Teaching and Learning Strategies

What follow are post-disaster secondary level coping activity strategies⁵ that the teacher can integrate into ongoing SVG CCMA/DRR module implementation.

<i>Experience and Feelings Sharing</i>	Begin by sharing your own experiences and feelings during the disaster. Allow yourself to articulate any 'crazy' thoughts or impulses you had - in that adolescent students will need reassurance that extreme emotions and impulses are normal when faced with disaster and that to share them is 'OK'. Then invite a whole class sharing, if necessary breaking into small groups if comfort levels are not high. Try to end on a positive note by sharing acts of nobility or heroism or discussing how the students could help their community.
<i>Emergency/Disaster Plans</i>	Help students to develop a family emergency plan working with their parents and share their plans (see <i>Module 1 Unit 6</i>). Break the class into small groups and have each develop a student-friendly version of the school disaster management plan for wide dissemination (see <i>Module 2 Unit 6 Activity 18</i>). Have them understand the community disaster management plan and advocate for greater disaster awareness in the community (see <i>Module 3 Unit 6 Activities 17 and 18</i>). Work of a purpose of this kind offers practical therapy but allows students to regain a sense of security and heightened locus of control. It very much sits at the intersection between disaster coping and disaster risk reduction learning.
<i>Helping Recovery Efforts</i>	Conduct group and whole class discussion on how students think they could help with the school/community recovery effort in concrete and practical ways. Have students reach consensus on which ideas to take forward, seek the principal's approval, and engage the students in school/community recovery. Practical involvement of this kind can help overcome feelings of helplessness and frustration while also dealing with 'survivor's guilt', a common reaction amongst those who have come through disaster situations unscathed.
<i>Creative Writing</i>	Writing can be very therapeutic. Ask students to write at length about an intense moment in the disaster experience (see <i>Module 1 Activity 8</i> for hurricane story writing in a structured manner), or to write a funny

⁵ Selby, D. & Kagawa, F. Ibid. 166,168.

	disaster story, or to write a 'happy ending' disaster story.
<i>Guest Speaker</i>	Invite to class a therapist or counselor skilled and experienced in handling post-traumatic stress disorder or in counseling disaster victims. Use the process described in <i>Module 3 Activity 17</i> .
<i>Peer Counseling</i>	Have students form pairs and nominate person 'A' and person 'B'. Ask person 'A' to tell their personal disaster stories. 'B' should listen <i>very actively</i> and add <i>prompting questions</i> and <i>affirming, encouraging and supportive remarks</i> . When 'A' feels that sufficient time has been spent, have each pair reverse roles so that 'B' tells their personal stories while 'A' actively listens. The stories told, have each pair discuss emotions and reactions they found they had in common. Also ask pairs to discuss how comfortable and safe they felt during the sharing process, whether the sharing of emotion felt forced, and whether there were things they held back (no pressure to reveal these). Pairs can be invited, but not pressured to share with the class emotions and reactions they found they had in common. <i>This activity needs a high level of sensitivity in its facilitation.</i>
<i>Family Role Play</i>	Ask the class to form groups of five. Set an imaginary family scene in which a big storm is coming, the lights are out, there is no warm food and people are grumpy and unsupportive. After practice in role, have each group present their sketch. Then ask questions about what might have caused the negative mood and behaviors; also, ask about how helpful such a mood and behaviors is. Repeat the role-play this time with family members being supportive of each other. Ask the class to compare the differences in the two role-plays.
<i>Visual Arts Expression</i>	Have students portray their disaster experiences and observations using various media: a school wall mural; a disaster aftermath photographic exhibition; a poster display.
<i>Dramatic and Musical Arts Expression</i>	Have students represent emotions that came up during the disaster through live body sculptures (i.e. positioning and shaping their bodies to express a suite of feelings); music and dance; street theatre.
<i>Disaster History</i>	Have students collect newspaper accounts of a past-disaster, interview community members about their experiences, interview members of the Meteorological Office or National Emergency Management Organization (NEMO) about what happened (use process described in

	<i>Module 3 Activity 2</i>), and have them write a history of the disaster, prepare and give a community presentation, or prepare an exhibit for community viewing. Use processes described in <i>Module 3 Activities 2, 16, 17 and 18</i> .
<i>Action Learning</i>	Have students write letters to or petition local agencies about aspects of the hazard or disaster that has happened, write letters to the local press, or organize a community meeting to consider what has happened and what needs to be done for a safer future. After trauma, such activism can be very therapeutic. Use process described in <i>Module 2 Activity 15 (Stage 2)</i>

4.2. Sample Relaxation Activities for Students

Relaxation exercises that provide relief from stress and negative emotions should be part of post-disaster coping activities at school. Relaxation exercises normally have at least one of the following components: breathing, visualization and physical movement. Sample activities below include these components. Teachers are encouraged to adjust them so that they are contextually and culturally appropriate

Relaxation Activity 1: Breathing with Color⁶

Purpose: Helping students learn to control their breathing so that they can feel calmer inside in a difficult and stressful situation

Procedure:

Step 1: Ask students without talking to each other to choose a color that evokes good and relaxed feelings. Then ask each student to choose a different color that evokes uncomfortable and bad feelings they would like to get rid of.

Step 2: Hold a whole class discussion to share what the different colors mean to the students and what they associate them with

Step 3: Invite students to sit comfortably and quietly in their chairs or on the floor. Slowly read aloud the following instructions in a calm voice, leaving appropriate spaces between the sentences:

*Close your eyes and take a slow, deep breath in through your nose...
Imagine the air you are breathing in is your good color. As you are
imagining this, say to yourself: 'In with the good color.'*

*Hold the good air inside for a few second and let it fill you with good
feelings.*

⁶ Adapted from British Red Cross (undated). *Coping Skills Module*.

Now calmly and slowly blow the air out through your mouth. Imagine the air coming out of your mouth is the negative and bad color. Slowly blow those negative feelings away....

Let's repeat this breathing exercise a few more times. Breath in very slowly with the good color.... then breath out very slowly with the bad color... Feel your arms and legs start to relax.... Again breath in with good color.... Breath out slowly with the bad color.... Feel your stomach and shoulders becoming more relaxed....

Let's repeat one more time... Breath in very slowly with the good color.... Breath out very slowly with bad color.... Feel your whole body is relaxed....

Bring yourself back to the present.... Focus on your breathing... Breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly... Wiggle your fingers and toes. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Keep those good and relaxed feelings inside you.

Step 4: Have students sit for a few seconds in silence. Invite students, if they wish, to share how they are feeling now.

Relaxation Activity 2: Focus on the Light⁷

Purpose: Helping students visualize positive images and feel calmer inside.

Procedure:

Step 1: Invite students to sit comfortably and quietly in their chairs or on the floor. Then ask them to close their eyes.

Step 2: Slowly read aloud the following instructions in a calm voice leaving appropriate silences between the sentences:

Grow your back longer and taller, reaching your head to the sky.... Breathe in through your nose.... Feel your breath relaxing your body.... Imagine that you see a light in front of your eyes Bring that light up to your forehead.... Allow the light to move into your head, filling your entire head with bright, warm light.... Where this bright light exists, there cannot be darkness..... There is only room for happy thoughts..... Feel the light pushing out any bad thoughts. Only good thoughts are left in your mind..... See the light moving down to your ears, so you can only hear good things.... See the light moving into your jaw and mouth. Let yourself only speak good words... Let the light travel down your neck and shoulders to your heart. Let your heart be filled with the light so you can only feel good feelings.... Feel the light is shining out from your heart and you are showering everyone and everything around you with love and good

⁷ Adapted from INEE. (undated). *Training for Primary School Teachers in Crisis Contexts*. 8.

feelings.... Feel your whole body filled with the light, so you are glowing with good thoughts and feelings....

Bring yourself back to the present.... Focus on your breathing... Breathe in slowly and breathe out slowly... Wiggle your fingers and toes. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Keep those good and relaxed feelings inside you.

Step 4: Have students sit for a few seconds in silence. Invite students, if they wish, to share how they are feeling now.

Relaxation Activity 3: Shake it Loose⁸

Purpose: Helping students release tensions in their bodies by shaking their whole body for a few minutes

Procedure:

Step 1: Ask students to stand comfortably, bend their knees slightly and relax their shoulders. Ask them to take a few deep breaths.

Step 2: Read aloud the following instructions leaving appropriate spaces of silence between the sentences:

Start shaking from your feet up through your knees. Remember to keep your knees bent.... Let the shaking move up through your hips and your shoulders..... Let your whole body shake, feeling the energies moving up from your feet.... Keep going.... Keep shaking.... Keep your knees bent..... Let your shoulders go..... Let your head go.... If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to shaking..... Let your jaw hang open We carry a lot of tension in the jaw, the neck, the shoulders, the hips, the knees, the wrists and hands. Your whole body should be shaking now.... Keep going – keep shaking... If you want to stop, shake even more.... Let the shaking loosen up tensions in your whole body.... Let your head go.... Let your jaw be open. If sounds come, just let them come... your whole body is shaking Keep going.

Now stop.... Stand still and pay attention to how your body feels. Breathe deeply. [Note: there is no need for a post-activity debriefing.]

⁸ Adapted from Shultz, J.H. et al. (2012). *Better Learning Program 1: Increasing Learning Capacity Among Pupils in Ongoing Crisis*.