Helping Students Cope in an Age of Terrorism: Strategies for School Counselors

School counselors experience unique challenges as they struggle to provide students with coping skills geared to the outside world including acts of terrorism. School-aged students in the United States are one of the most vulnerable populations in the event of a terrorist act. This article offers a review of the current and most relevant literature on the topic of helping students cope in an age of terrorism. The authors provide an overview of a six-step strategic model for school counselors to help prepare students to live and cope in an age of terrorism.

During the 20th century, historians recorded both a rise in the number of armed conflicts and a change in the nature of these conflicts. Residential and urban areas around the world are increasingly affected by violence and armed conflict, the number of civilians who become victims likely will increase (Tawil, 2003). These conflicts strongly impact the U.S. population. According to Sullivan (2002), more lives were lost on September 11, 2001, in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York than during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The nature of today’s conflicts includes school terrorism such as the April 20, 1999, Columbine tragedy (Pascopella, 2004) and the March 23, 2005, Red Lake shootings (Jans, 2005). Over one-fifth of the U.S. population can be found in its 119,000 public and private schools on any given weekday during the academic year (Bowman, 2003). With such a large number of people housed in schools across America, acts of terrorism pose a challenge to school counselors and other school personnel as they struggle to provide students with coping skills geared to the needs of the 21st century.

The chair of the National Advisory Committee on Children and Terrorism (NACCT), Angela Diaz, provided recommendations to the Secretary of Health and Human Services regarding children and terrorism. In her 2003 correspondence taken from the NACCT Web site (www.bt.cdc.gov/children/index.asp), Diaz indicated that children in the United States (more than 70 million under the age of 18) would be one of the most vulnerable populations in the event of a terrorist act. Diaz wrote in that same letter that “while significant resources have been dedicated to the protection of bridges, national monuments and other physical assets, comparatively little has been done to safeguard the health and well-being of children” (NACCT, 2003, ¶ 2).

One of the recommendations made by Diaz and the committee called for psychosocial initiatives that address children’s needs and those of their families in the event of an act of terrorism. Addressing the psychosocial needs of students and their families is one of the primary roles of school counselors as outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) in its recently developed ASCA National Model® for School Counseling Programs. Meeting the personal and social needs of schoolchildren has long been one of the important areas of involvement for school counselors (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Cobia & Henderson, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to provide a review of current literature relative to (a) students’ responses to trauma and disaster in general, (b) current models and curricula useful to school counselors as they help students and their families cope with terrorism and the fear of terrorism, and (c) practical application tips and suggestions for school counselors.

RESPONSES TO TRAUMA AND DISASTER

Students respond to trauma and disaster in a variety of ways. Age and level of development make a difference in responses and coping abilities (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). NIMH has provided a list of behaviors related to age and development as a guide to behaviors a student might exhibit following a traumatic event. A child’s response to potential fears and trauma is dependent upon whether the child feels more powerful than the feared object or event (Robinson, Rotter, Fey, &
Students who feel secure, valued, and empowered will have less difficulty in coping. School counselors should be aware that as a result of trauma or disaster, students of all ages may experience changes in behavior such as increased activity level, decreased concentration, inability to be attentive, changes in academic performance, and/or increased absenteeism.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), some students may respond to trauma and disaster by experiencing “fear, loss of control, anger, loss of stability, isolation, and confusion” (NASP, n.d.). Younger children may feel confused about terrorist attacks and war and also may experience difficulty differentiating between the reality of war and the fantasy of war as portrayed in the media (NASP).

In their book *Children’s Fears of War and Terrorism*, Moses, Aldridge, Cellitti, and McCorquodale (2003) presented three factors that impact a child’s response and must be considered when helping a child to cope with fears of war and terrorism. These include (a) the child’s context and personal circumstances, (b) the child’s temperament and personality, and (c) the child’s age. Context and culture are powerful influences on a student’s ability to cope. The environment in which a student lives impacts his or her sense of security. For example, if a child is from an active military family or a family in which a member has to be deployed quickly, such as with a Reserve military unit or the National Guard, he or she may feel out of control or unstable (ASCA, 2003).

Socioeconomic status is another example of a personal circumstantial factor that may influence a student’s fear response and ability to cope. As cited in Moses et al. (2003), the fear of terrorism is greater if a student is from an impoverished background than from a middle-class background. Students from low-income homes experience more fears with greater intensity than do students of middle-class homes (Coeyman, 2003). Lower socioeconomic status also affects proficiency in social situations and academic achievement.

Some students may respond to trauma with such intensity that problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may result. PTSD may occur at any age and symptoms usually begin within 3 months of the traumatic experience. According to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), a person who has been exposed to trauma, such as an act of terrorism, may respond with “intense fear, feelings of helplessness and/or horror” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 463). The DSM-IV also references omen formation as something children may experience following trauma; omen formation is defined as believing in “an ability to foresee future untoward events” (p. 466). According to the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (n.d.), the symptoms and criteria for PTSD in children and adolescents differ from those of adults. Children may experience frightening dreams without understandable content and will reenact the traumatic event through repetitive play. Factors that increase the likelihood of a student developing PTSD include the severity of the traumatic event, the physical proximity to it, and parental reaction to the event (see www.ncptsd.org).

School counselors are often the first professional whom students and families encounter immediately following a disaster. The action taken by the school counselor at the point of trauma is critical to the impacted student’s long-range well-being. Crisis intervention theories and crisis response models signify that the immediate response following a traumatic event may determine the long-term mental health outcome of the individual impacted by the trauma (Brock, Sandoval, & Lewis, 2001; James & Gilliland, 2001). Students living in the 21st century in America are facing the possibility of terrorist attacks and are likely to experience fears related to terrorism and other violent acts.

Auger, Seymour, and Roberts (2004) surveyed 89 school counselors and related helping professionals regarding the aftermath that the terrorist action toward the United States on September 11, 2001, had on students and staff in K-12 schools. The results of the survey indicated that students were highly distressed immediately following the September 11th attacks. However, approximately 6 weeks later, the level of student distress had significantly decreased. Based upon these findings, school counselors evidently need to have strategies specifically designed to aid in helping students cope with terrorism.

**CURRENT MODELS, CURRICULUM GUIDES, AND PROGRAMS**

**Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Model**

Mitchell and Everly (as cited in Juhnke, 1997) developed a critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) model to use with adult emergency workers who experienced extremely traumatic events. CISD is a structured small group process that consists of seven stages in which participants discuss their reactions and feelings following the witnessing of a tragic or violent event. Practitioners conducting the group processes are trained briefly in CISD. Mitchell (2003) stated that crisis intervention techniques are not simple and are most effective when applied by skilled interventionists. Thompson (1993) discussed the use of this model in schools with students who experienced sudden loss, such as the suicide of a classmate.
Juhnke (1997) proposed an adapted version of CISD to be used with elementary and middle school students as a post-violence intervention. Juhnke’s model is different from Mitchell and Everly’s original form of the model. Juhnke’s model is designed for use with mental health professionals who specifically have knowledge surrounding the developmental needs of children. School counselors do have the intensive educational training surrounding children and their developmental needs necessary to implement this model. In addition, Juhnke’s model differs from the original with its use of a separate debriefing for parents and a joint student-parent debriefing. Because the model is designed for a minimum of three debriefing team members, with the help of other counselors, staff, and administrators, school counselors could employ this model to help students and parents in the event of a violent episode. Juhnke (2002) suggested the use of the adapted family debriefing model for helping both students and parents regarding ongoing terrorist threats and post-terrorism concerns.

Mental health care practitioners and researchers are currently debating the efficacy and appropriateness of debriefings (Appleton, 2001). The issue of this debate is not that emergency psychological services are needed, but what is the most effective method of providing these services. According to Appleton, finding one particular method of intervention that is complete probably will never occur.

“Facing Fear” Curriculum
The American Red Cross (2001) has developed a K-12 curriculum (supplemental to its “Masters of Disaster”) entitled Facing Fear: Helping Young People Deal with Terrorism and Other Tragic Events, which includes lesson plans, activities, and demonstrations that can be incorporated within core subject areas. The lesson plans and activities are arranged in three chapters: Chapter 1, “Feelings,” focuses on loss, sadness, and anger and is appropriate for use immediately following a tragic event. Chapter 2, “Facts and Perspectives,” provides information on the media’s role and how to discriminate facts from the media’s portrayal of events. In addition, chapter 2 teaches the principles of the Red Cross. Chapter 3, “Future,” discusses ways for children and their families to assimilate the past and plan for the uncertainties of the future. The materials consist of four lesson plans (divided by grade level) for each of the three chapters with approximately 27 hands-on student and family-oriented activities. The lessons are aligned with national health, social studies, and language arts curriculum standards. Facing Fear is available in printed form from local American Red Cross chapters, and the lessons and activity sheets can be downloaded from the Red Cross Web site at www.redcross.org.

The hands-on activities included in this curriculum would be useful as school counselors implement the guidance curricula as outlined in the ASCA National Model (Davis, 2005). For example, lesson plan 7 for Grades 9–12 includes the following activity for students:

An act of terrorism or other tragic event may have far-reaching effects on many facets of life. Help students apply the concept of the ripple effect to understand the chain of events. Set up the bulletin board with several paper “stones” in the center. Assign each ripple of the event a marker of a different color. Have students compare the ripple effect of tossing a stone into water with the impact of the event under discussion. If the stone represents the event, what would be the first ripple, the second, the third and so on (the families, the community where the event occurred, the state, the nation, the world; the immediate impact, the ongoing impact, the far-reaching impact). (American Red Cross, 2001, p. 26)

Tips on Children and Fear of War and Terrorism
The National Association of School Psychologists has posted tips for parents and teachers in regard to terrorism at www.nasponline.org. NASP has provided these tips online under the heading of “Children and Fear of War and Terrorism.” Basic recommendations include parents and teachers remaining calm, helping children determine real from imagined fears, providing children a chance to discuss their concerns, and limiting exposure to media coverage and violence (NASP, n.d.).

ASCA Counselor Immediate Response Guide
ASCA has provided a “Counselor Immediate Response Guide” for critical incidents on its Web site at www.schoolcounselor.org. These suggestions are provided under the headings of “During Incident,” “First 24 Hours After Incident,” “First Three Days,” “First Week,” “Staff Assistance,” and “Responses.” Each heading lists several practical suggestions for school counselors. ASCA also states that these suggestions are not meant to take the place of existing district and school policies. Although the guidelines offered are helpful and very specific to the role of school counselors in critical incidents, they do not offer strategies as directly related to the threat or aftermath of a terrorist act.

Counselor’s Guide on “Terrorism, Trauma, and Tragedies”
The American Counseling Association (ACA)
Foundation has published the second edition of the resource guide *Terrorism, Trauma, and Tragedies: A Counselor’s Guide to Preparing and Responding*, edited by Webber, Bass, and Yep (2005). This guide was written for counselors, teachers, administrators, parents, and others focusing on practical strategies, techniques, and plans to help those who may experience trauma and/or a tragic event. The guide is divided into six sections: (a) personal reflections on September 11, 2001; (b) responding to terrorism; (c) responding to tragedies in schools; (d) counseling strategies; (e) hurricanes, wars, accidents, and other crises; and (f) coping resources. Several organizations such as NASP, the National Mental Health Association, and the American Association of Pastoral Counselors also have included material in ACA’s resource guide.

**Crisis Management Institute**

The Crisis Management Institute (CMI) has worked with schools in the aftermath of trauma and tragedy (Lovre, 2001). CMI designs training manuals to offer comprehensive resources. After major traumatic events occur, information is posted on the Web site, which may be downloaded and can be used immediately in classrooms. Guidelines on a variety of topics that would be useful for school counselors and parents at the elementary, middle, and high school levels also may be downloaded from CMI’s Web site (www.cmionline.org).

**Use of Children’s Literature to Develop Coping Strategies**

Nicholson and Pearson (2003) suggested the use of children’s literature in classroom guidance as helpful in teaching coping skills to children who are dealing with adult fears such as death, crime, and war. Nicholson and Pearson stated that media coverage and the emphasis on terrorism have served to heighten children’s fears about death. Acknowledging that bibliotherapy helps children in their ability to develop coping strategies by identifying internal and external resources, these authors provided a listing of books for classroom guidance suitable for Grades K–3. For each book, themes and coping strategies are described as well as detailed guidance activities. Bibliotherapy is valuable for all ages and similar listings for other age groups are available.

**Need for Specific Materials**

Although useful materials are available, based upon our review, we found a need for materials specific for school counselors to help children cope with terrorism and the fear of terrorism. The next section proposes strategies for the school counselor and provides suggestions for preventing or minimizing the fear of terrorism and building coping skills for use in an age of terrorism.

**STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS**

**Counselors’ Emotional Stability**

Prior to working with children, school counselors need to be aware of their own personal level of trauma. Counselors need to understand that if they are feeling vulnerable and under attack, their ability to work with children is hampered. Myers-Walls (2002) wrote that in these situations a cycle of silence may result. According to Myers-Walls, children may respond to trauma by displaying a tendency to get back to routine and a normal life as soon as possible. When adults also are traumatized, they may assume that this response indicates that the children are not upset and do not need to discuss the event. Also, the adults may wish to maintain silence and get back to routine in order to avoid the pain of the reality of the experience. However, the opposite is true. The children need to have the freedom to talk with their parents and supportive adults (see www.apa.org). School counselors need to be emotionally stable enough to provide the setting for such freedom of discussion to exist. If personal issues, past or present, inhibit a school counselor during a traumatic event, the need for help and/or assistance from other counselors should be recognized and utilized.

**Strategic Model**

We have developed a strategic model for school counselors to prepare students to cope in an age of terrorism. This model includes six steps and is a preventive, developmental tool to be implemented in its entirety as a step-by-step training model in an ongoing guidance curriculum. This model is designed to alleviate fear of terrorism and to strengthen students’ resilience in the event of an actual terrorist act within or outside of the school community. In the event of an actual terrorist act, the model then becomes an intervention as the skills previously learned are applied. At the point of an actual event, the model is to be used more as an integration of skills rather than sequential steps. The six steps are as follows:

1. Staying reality based
2. Expressing emotions
3. Developing concepts of life and death
4. Developing self-efficacy and a sense of control
5. Developing coping skills
6. Encouraging action by engagement in humanitarian efforts.
**Step 1: Staying reality based.** The first step is to build a reality-based foundation by being honest and factual about current concerns and events (ASCA, 2003). This attitude and understanding will provide reassurance to students while also being honest with them about the possible events and procedures necessary if an event occurs. A major focus should be on developing a feeling of safety within the students. This includes the description of safety measures that may need to be taken. Explain the school safety procedures in the event of any acts of violence and terrorism within the school or community and provide information about any community-based resources and/or crisis plans in the event of terrorist activity. Students also may benefit from suggested precautions to be taken at home or in the community. Adolescents and young adults may be able to take an active role in providing safety measures in their communities and homes. School counselors need to remember to be honest without being fearful or invoking fear in students.

**Step 2: Expressing emotions.** The second strategy is to acknowledge the feelings of students and to provide help in allowing them to express and understand the intensity of their emotions. The American Psychological Association’s (APA, 2004) *Reactions and Guidelines for Children Following Trauma/Disaster* states that students need to be encouraged to talk about confusing feelings and be allowed opportunities to express thoughts and emotions about the tragedy. In addition, students should be reminded that their reactions are normal following a very scary event (APA). Knowing and understanding the impact of emotions enables one to integrate thought, feeling, and action. This may help students to develop their emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence describes one’s knowledge and capacity to understand and process emotions experienced in daily life (Advanced Communications, 2003).

This step is intended to increase the student’s emotional quotient (EQ). The term *emotional quotient* was coined by Bar-On (2000) to distinguish emotional intelligence from cognitive intelligence (IQ). Elkins and Elksnin (2003) discussed the five domains of EQ, as outlined by Goleman (1995) and Mayer and Salovey (1997), as (a) knowing one’s emotions, (b) managing one’s emotions, (c) motivating oneself, (d) recognizing emotions of others, and (e) effectively using social skills when interacting with others. These areas of emotional intelligence will help students to understand and express their feelings and those of others in the face of fears. Children as young as 3 years of age can begin to understand the underlying causes of their emotions (Elkins & Elksnin). A suggestion, in line with this step, might be to use a visual aid such as a “feeling thermometer” to gauge the level of emotion. The counselor could provide a listing of emotions to help students expand their emotional vocabulary. Younger students also could “act out” the emotion that they are feeling. Rating scales may be used with older students. This step in the model is a training step and also is to be used as an intervention step in an actual crisis. Helping students to express their emotions is basic to successful coping with a fearful incident.

**Step 3: Developing concepts of life and death.** It is helpful to encourage students to discuss their perceptions about life and death with parents or community leaders. The school counselor is in the position to teach students about grief and loss issues and to prepare them for acceptance when experiencing loss. Children’s understanding of death is based upon their developmental stage. Young children under the age of 5 usually see death as “reversible, temporary, and impersonal” (Hospice Net, 2004). Children ages 5–9 begin to see death as final and understand that all living things must die, but they believe that they personally can escape death. They begin to associate death with images such as a skeleton or the “angel of death.” Ten-year-old children understand that death is irreversible and that all living things must die, including them. Adolescents may become intrigued with the concept of death and may begin developing philosophical beliefs about death (NASP, n.d.). According to Mishara (1999), if children have experienced death in the immediate family, their concept of death is more mature. In coping with life’s inexplicable happenings, children need to have the opportunity and freedom to discuss their personal perceptions with a caring adult. This type of discussion may serve to comfort the child and is certainly within the role of a well-trained and competent school counselor. Curriculum guides such as *Growing Through Grief: A K-12 Curriculum to Help Young People Through All Kinds of Loss* (O’Toole, 1989) are useful in this step.

**Step 4: Developing self-efficacy and a sense of control.** The fourth step is to employ various methods of empowering students so that they are able to develop a sense of control over their immediate environment (Kleinke, 1991). Gray and Ropeik (2002) stated that the ability to feel control over events decreases the level of fear. Three constructs have been described that enable children to feel confident in controlling events and challenges in their lives. These constructs are self-worth, security, and control (Robinson & Rotter, 1991). Students who feel personally powerful are less vulnerable to fear. Personal power can be achieved through having been given opportunities to make decisions. Also, helping students to focus on the present and future, rather than the past, will enable them to see possi-
bilities for change, which is empowering (Sklare, 1997). Providing children with opportunities for developing self-efficacy, competence, and mastery enables them to learn that they can have an effect on their social and physical surroundings (Kleinke).

**Step 5: Developing coping skills.** The fifth step involves teaching and practicing the use of the various coping skills needed to deal with the stressors encountered in today’s world (Kleinke, 1991). Breslin (2005) stated that educators can foster the development of coping skills in young children through heightened sensory awareness, positive expectations, a clear understanding of one’s strengths relating to accomplishment, and developing a sense of humor. Taking action is among the coping skills helpful to strengthen students’ sense of self-control. Sklare (1997) wrote, “Getting clients to take action first shows them that they are able to succeed regardless of previous obstacles” (p. 14). Action and movement help overcome a feeling of helplessness that often arises from fear.

The use of play interventions for small group and individual counseling in the school setting has been encouraged by researchers and recommended for use with elementary-aged children suffering from trauma (Drewes, Carey, & Schaefer, 2001). Ways to express emotions and feelings and cope with experiences are discussed in play intervention literature. Included among several recommendations made to school counselors by Shen and Sink (2002) are sand trays, toy ambulances, police cars, airplanes, stress-reducing materials, squishy balls, chalkboards, whiteboards, musical instruments, and dress-up costumes. Adolescents and young adults may benefit from such activities as writing a letter to an editor or collecting money or clothing for victims.

**Step 6: Encouraging action by engagement in humanitarian efforts.** The last step involves developing a humanitarian view, taking action, and expressing that action in a humanitarian effort. In order to aid students in the assimilation of knowledge as related to acts of terrorism, the development of a larger picture of the world in which they live is helpful. Acquiring a global perspective may be attained by an understanding of the three basic concepts of humanitarian education as defined by the Polish Humanitarian Organization (PHO, 2002): (a) human rights, (b) tolerance, and (c) helping others. The PHO has created a program for regular schools in Poland that emphasizes social responsibility and humanitarian work. Its humanitarian education program is built upon the belief that children and adolescents can actively influence positive changes in society. School counselors might wish to review this program and/or develop a similar approach for use with local schools and communities. It can be beneficial to discuss and employ methods that enable students to be seen as a humanitarian in their existing worldview.

The Exploring Humanitarian Law project was initiated by the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1998. The purpose of the project was to provide core learning modules for students ages 13–18 in the areas of citizenship and ethics education. The goal of the project was to integrate education in humanitarian law into secondary curricula around the world. Tawil (2003) stated that the education of students in humanitarian law (a) motivates an increased interest level in international current events and humanitarian action; (b) increases the ability to view conflicts at home from a humanitarian perspective; and (c) creates increased involvement in community service, which promotes humanitarian attitudes.

One way to promote awareness of human rights, anti-racism, and the value of community action is through classroom guidance lessons. Using the school community as a model and making changes in the school that reflect humanitarian perspectives can provide a greater understanding and, perhaps, an incentive for students to make similar changes in their homes and communities in which they live. An example of a humanitarian action led by the school counselor following classroom guidance is a school-sponsored clothing closet and/or food bank for the community. Students at the middle and high school levels could operate the bank. Elementary-level students could be involved in helping to supply the food and clothing. Resources outside of the school such as business partners could be utilized to aid the counselor and students in these efforts. Schools would respond to the community based upon the needs of their community. In addition, local community agencies and churches may be available to the counselor in providing humanitarian education to students.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

We have provided a review of the most current and relevant literature on the topic of helping students cope in an age of terrorism. It is clear that fear and trauma are common products when disaster strikes our own land and people, as well as throughout the entire world. We are dealing with an age of terrorism with many unknown variables. School counselors once again must be prepared to provide the necessary help for students and their families in order to minimize fears and develop coping skills for dealing with the realities of the 21st century. We have provided an overview of a strategic model with six steps for preparing students to live and cope in an age of terrorism. If the model were implemented consistently and uniformly, we believe that it could...
have a profound impact upon decreasing school terrorism and, ultimately, worldwide terrorist acts. If counselors work with students in a reality-based manner with honesty and integrity, they could enable students to express their emotions and develop self-efficacy. Developing these skills along with the other coping skills described in the model, followed by taking action in a humanitarian effort, will increase understanding of others around the world.

References

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