

Acknowledging the Anniversary

For educators

As we move closer to the anniversary of the mass tragedy in Nova Scotia on April 18th and 19th 2020, we want to acknowledge that this may be a particularly challenging time for students, families, school staff and communities in Nova Scotia.

Anniversaries can create renewed feelings of grief, anxiety and trauma, as well as concerns about something like this happening in the future. The increased media attention, memorials and social media activity surrounding an anniversary can be both welcomed and supportive, and overwhelming and difficult, depending on an individual's or a community's experiences and circumstances.

The following considerations and recommendations are based on the literature and conversations with the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health to help you navigate ways to support your children, youth, students, and school staff during this time.

One of the best ways for children and youth to manage their sense of helplessness, vulnerability, anger or sorrow is to be provided with an opportunity to make a positive difference in their daily lives and the life of their school community. The anniversary period provides a special window of opportunity to bolster student and school investment in good citizenship, peer support and leadership and community service programs."

NCTSN, 'School Planning for Sept 11th Anniversary', p. 6



Guidelines for Schools

- A school's anniversary plan should be guided by a system-wide approach with flexibility built-in to be responsive to the unique experiences and needs of the members of particular schools.
 - It should include a communication strategy for staff, caregivers, media and public; revisit school safety plans; and emphasize mental health support services and referral procedures.
- If a tragedy did not occur on school grounds, memorials and memorial activities would generally not happen on school grounds (exceptions may apply for schools in areas significantly impacted by the tragedy). Children and youth have to go to school and may be re-traumatized (or traumatized in the case of younger students just learning about it) by a memorial or memorial activities.
 - Ideally, memorial activities would happen in the community, away from the school, allowing students to choose whether or not to visit or participate.
- Have a staff meeting to identify and discuss the particular needs of potentially vulnerable groups of students ahead of time:
 - Students who knew individuals who died or were injured, or participated in the rescue and relief operations;
 - Students whose parents are in 'high risk' professions (i.e., fire and police personnel)
 - Students who have a history of trauma, violence or sudden loss;
 - Students who tend to be anxious or reactive;
 - Students with physical or developmental (dis)abilities re: safety concerns

These students may benefit from: a conversation between the school and their caregivers to discuss any concerns; outreach that may be as simple as a discrete supportive contact from a school counselor, trusted teacher or staff member; opportunities from a designated staff for checking in about how they're doing; time out of the 'spotlight'; additional support or counseling (in school or at the IWK or Nova Scotia Health). Work with the student and/or those closest to them ahead of time in order to determine what the student would prefer.

- Make staff wellness and support a significant priority. Meet with all staff ahead of the anniversary to ensure everyone knows the plan and feels supported. Take a team-based approach to helping and supporting one another and do check-ins throughout the week.
- Avoid announcing memorial activities or references to the tragedy over the school PA system.
- Do not do safety or lockdown drills too close to the anniversary.
- In every school, at all times, there are children and youth recovering from tragedies and adversities. Consider ways throughout the school year to create a school culture that is trauma aware and trauma responsive.

Guidelines for School Staff

- Recognize that students may respond to the anniversary in a wide variety of ways. Show patience and help students regulate and feel safe and supported in their school environment.
- Remember, for some kids their response won't look like grief, it might look like distraction, aggression, anxiety, helplessness, stomach aches, fear, confusion, hyperactivity, impulsivity, etc. Help students to regulate with exercises (e.g., breathing, grounding, yoga) or regulation items (e.g., colouring pages, fidgets, a ball), choose positive coping strategies, and feel supported in a safe environment.
- Plan ahead how to respond to related comments, questions or discussions in class. Provide honest, short, age-appropriate responses and offer support.
- Be clear that participation in any related discussions or activities is opt-in and provide simultaneous alternative activity options. Give students permission to leave an event (recommended that staff/family supervise students that leave).
- Provide additional access to counseling support (e.g., principal, guidance, school social worker, psychologist, IWK or NSH clinician, etc.) for a few weeks around the anniversary since the date may create strong reactions for some students and staff.
- Consider that students may have increased safety concerns the week of the anniversary and review school safety protocols ahead of time.
- During the week (and throughout the year), engage students in positive, constructive activities that promote coping skills, resilience, wellbeing and a sense of community connectedness (e.g., breathing exercises, mindfulness, acts of kindness, volunteering, etc.).

Resources

Use your smartphone camera to scan the codes below or click the link.



Road to Resilience Webinar Series

www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health/parents/road-resilience-webinar-series



IWK Health - Trauma Informed Care

www.yourexperiencesmatter.com



Staff Resiliency and Wellness for Educators

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKhazhY6LRE



National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org