

Community Care after Collective Trauma at Elementary School



ABSTRACT

Within less than two years, Foothill Elementary School in Goleta experienced two student deaths. On August 11, 2014 authorities were notified that William and Sheila Holzer, along with their two grandchildren, Vincent and Sebastian Holzer were murdered by Nicholas Holzer, the father of the two children. Vincent was ten years old and a student at Foothill Elementary School. His older brother, Sebastian, was a junior high student at La Colina Jr. High, but attended Foothill for elementary school. About a year and a half later on March 23, 2016, authorities responded to a triple homicide. Dr. Weidong "Henry" Han, his wife, Huijie "Jennie" Yu, and their daughter, Emily, were found dead from gun shot related injuries in their home. Emily was approaching her sixth birthday and was in kindergarten at Foothill Elementary School. The following case study reviews community care response in the days, weeks, and months that followed these two critical incidents and highlights partnerships and collaborations between faith-based and community-based agencies.

NATURE OF THE RESPONSE

Foothill Elementary School and La Colina Junior High administrators made arrangements to respond to staff, students, and the greater community after both tragedies. The director of Santa Barbara County Behavioral Wellness and volunteers from Santa Barbara Response Network, a grassroots community group of mental health practitioners and chaplains, were present on the elementary school's campus for the first few days after each incident to offer psychological first aid and support to the law enforcement already providing service.

CASE STUDY
by Libby Baker
ICTG Intern
(Spring 2017)



P. O. Box 3498
Santa Barbara, CA 93130
(805) 979 4636
www.ictg.org

Suzanne Grimesey, Chief Quality Care and Strategy Officer of Santa Barbara County Behavioral Wellness, worked alongside the district superintendent and the administration from both schools. They quickly determined those in the community who were most greatly impacted besides the immediate families. Staff and volunteers then divided their efforts and channeled their energies to particular sports teams, churches, friends, and other institutions most directly impacted by the deaths. Right away a statement was made by district administrators regarding the basic information of the trauma. This was communicated to the staff, students, and families affected. The statement also included where psychological first aid services would be provided on campus. Ms. Grimesey and her team compiled multiple resources to distribute to teachers that informed them how to discuss the trauma appropriately by age group.

A "compassion center" was then instituted on campus and staffed with psychologists and trained volunteers in psychological first aid for students, teachers, staff, and families. Compassion centers were first used after the Isla Vista shooting in 2014. It was during this incident when Dr. Gil Reyes, an expert in post-disaster psychology, first created centers where trained volunteers executed psychological first aid and compassionately listened to anyone who needed to talk. Volunteers wearing "compassion patrol" t-shirts roamed the neighborhoods of Isla Vista and ensured that the community felt safe and heard after the traumatic shooting incident.

Compassion centers and patrols were then replicated following the two critical incidents affecting Foothill Elementary School. Volunteers with Santa Barbara Response Network collaborated with the Santa Barbara Sheriff's office and spent time knocking on doors around Foothill school and offering emotional and spiritual care as needed. These volunteers also carried a letter from the Sheriff's office that stated who they were and the reason they were walking around the neighborhood.

Father Jon Hedges from St. Athanasius Church and chaplain for the Santa Barbara Police Department and Fire Department was also present on Foothill campus to provide spiritual care for families if they so initiated contact. He offered debriefing services to first responders and prayed for peace and calmness with families who approached him. Later, a memorial service was organized by friends of the Han family the weekend after the incident. Volunteers from SBRN organized a tent station in the back of the service for anyone in the community who needed to talk, process, or gather referrals for counseling services.

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The trained professionals and volunteers delivered psychological first aid in a manner of 8 specific steps. The steps go as follows:

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA)

1. Contact and Engagement

Contact and engagement entails making contact with a student, staff or family member or responding to a contact in a non-intrusive and compassionate way. The idea is to promote calmness, hope, and support. This step includes a formal introduction stating who you are and the services available to those impacted.

2. Safety and Comfort

Safety and Comfort entails enhancing immediate and ongoing safety and providing physical and emotional comfort for those impacted. The first priority is to make the environment safe and relocate to an establish safe place if necessary. Attention should first be given to those in shock or are in danger of self-harm. To maximize the safety and comfort efforts, factual and pertinent information regarding the events should be communicated and what services are provided. Additionally, those affected should be informed how to interact with media.

3. Stabilization

Stabilization entails calming students and staff who are emotionally overwhelmed, disoriented, disconnected, panicked, or unresponsive immediately after an event occurs.

4. Information Gathering Needs and Current Concerns

Information gathering needs and current concerns entails tailoring PFA to the immediate needs of students and staff. PFA volunteers find out basic information about the event indirectly before questioning individuals about how they are doing, their interpretation of what happened, how they were impacted, what is bothering them and anything extra they would like to share.

5. Practical Assistance

Practical assistance entails helping to address students' and staffs' immediate needs and concerns. Volunteers inform what and where resources are available and help individuals discern what they need most and how they can take action to meet their needs.

6. Connection with Social Supports

Connection with social supports enhances ongoing contacts students and staff have with family and friends and seeks to establish sources of support for those in needing the connections. Another goal in this stage is to establish a sense of community within the group affected.

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7. Information on Coping

Information on Coping provides information about coping and instills confidence to face adversity and trauma. Volunteers bring normalcy to their emotions and reassure victims that strong responses are expected. Volunteers are ready to give adaptive coping skills and maladaptive coping actions along with relaxation techniques, and frustration and anger coping management skills that would best help trauma victims.

8. Linkage with Collaborative Services

Linkage and collaborative services seek to connect trauma victims with services immediately or for future use.

NEEDS

Shock or Freezing

When something traumatic happens and impacts a large community, it is common for those impacted to "freeze". Teachers freeze and are uncertain the way in which they should respond that is appropriate for children to receive. Both Santa Barbara Behavioral Wellness and Santa Barbara Response Network sought to empower and support administration and staff throughout the response process and give them agency in the midst of their own personal grief. The services sought to bring normalcy to the situation and affirm that feeling strong emotion is not abnormal.

Strong Emotion

Teachers, administrators, and students need to be affirmed that the uncomfortable emotions that come alongside trauma will not be felt for the rest of their life; it is temporary and they are wise to feel the emotions when they are present. Children often are uncomfortable with feeling strong emotions. If it is their first time experiencing trauma, grief and sadness may be startling and disorienting emotions. Children and adolescents need to be affirmed that their emotions are not abnormal and are healthy to feel. It is encouraged to lean into the emotion and wrestle with how they make one feel.

Heroic Acts

It is normal and common for a traumatized community to feel the urge to "do something" for those most directly affected. While this action has the greatest intentions behind it, staff and students need to be reminded that it by no means takes away the pain or trauma. Community projects serve as a reminder to the community that the school is strong and resilient, but do not completely heal the loss of a friend or family member.

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Ripple Effects

Next-door neighbors were also impacted and expressed a need to be supported. Neighborhood check-ins were most beneficial to establish stability and safety.

Main Contact/Point Person(s)

Like it was previously mentioned in the shock or freezing needs, survivors of trauma desperately search for a point person or contact that will provide stability, calmness and direction in an uncertain and high intensity situation. Often times, survivors are uncertain of what measures to take or words to say. Santa Barbara Behavioral Wellness, SBRN, first responders, and chaplains all embodied the various needs of a point person. They were able to give direction to school staff and administration where guidance was needed, provide emotional and spiritual support to traumatized individuals, and bring peace to a chaotic and grieving community. When paralysis strikes a grieving community, it demonstrates the strong need and urgency for other collaborations to take effect to bring life and agency back to the impacted persons.

RESULTS

Neighbors to Foothill Elementary were comforted when Fr. Hedges and volunteers from SBRN walked around the neighborhood. One neighbor was seen ferociously chopping his bushes when Fr. Hedges approached him. The neighbor responded by weeping uncontrollably and felt comforted that Fr. Hedges took the time to talk with him about how he was doing.

Teachers at Foothill Elementary School and La Colina Junior High felt relieved when Suzanne Grimmesey from SB Behavioral Wellness imparted resources describing how to approach conversations with age appropriate language. Teachers felt like their agency was given back to them.

Dr. Gil Reyes noted that some Foothill Elementary families were resistant to psychological first aid and teachers talking about the trauma in their respective classrooms. Some families preferred speaking to their children separately or refraining from mentioning the crisis at all to avoid instilling fear or sadness in their children.

Principal of La Colina Junior High, Mr. David Ortiz, was immensely grateful for Dr. Reyes' resourcing immediately after the Holzer family murder. Dr. Reyes was a calming presence and provided opportunities to process emotions and anger.

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CONCLUSION

Sometimes the most traumatic and heartbreaking moments bring communities together and reveal remarkable courage. The ability to come to one's aid and propel survivors forward with agency and confidence is most optimal when the collaborations and relationships are in place between companies, businesses, schools, neighborhoods, first responders, churches, and faith based organizations. It is necessary to establish community wide relationships prior to traumatic events in order to support a hurting group of people effectively and care for the community holistically. Community care is best served when professionals beyond first responders adhere to the variety of needs present in light of trauma. SBRN is an example of how mental health professionals and faith leaders trained in psychological first aid can collaborate effectively to provide emotional and spiritual care after critical incidents, particularly among schools and neighborhoods. Their efforts can ensure a wider scope of persons and groups impacted by critical incidents are met, and the wholeness (physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological) of their experiences are valued.

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