

Adults Can Help Teens Manage Academics During Trauma

Students directly and indirectly affected by tragic events may suffer academically.



By [Alexandra Pannoni](#), Digital Producer | Dec. 18, 2017, at 8:00 a.m.

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Teachers should modify expectations, as needed, for students dealing with trauma and not assume all will need or want academic adjustments. (Will & Deni McIntyre/Getty Images)

As 2017 comes to a close, many teens are feeling the effects of devastating events, including [school shootings](#), natural disasters and terrorist attacks.

"They are bombarded constantly, and they are very connected to it," says David Head, director of mental health and wellness for Communities In Schools Houston, part of a national nonprofit that provides services to underserved students.

Students directly and indirectly affected by these events may be feeling the effects of trauma – including difficulty concentrating, anxiety, fear, withdrawal from others and loss of control. And these could hurt their academic performance, he says.

Head also notes that trauma can be more complex than one event. For instance, students may be experiencing trauma because of poverty or abuse.

However, [high school](#) teachers and parents can help.

It's important that parents and teachers – along with counselors – lay a foundation for students to be equipped to handle traumatic events from a young age, says Ernest Cox, president of the Texas School Counseling Association. One way they can do this is by frequently checking in with students, reaffirming that their experience is valid and making sure they know adults are always available to listen.

When traumatic events happen, some students may be affected more than others, says Cox, also an assistant professor of school counseling at [Texas A&M University—San Antonio](#). In the days and months that follow, adults should also remember that some students may seem fine on the outside but may not be OK internally, he says.

Adults need to be present and let students know they are loved, Cox says. If parents and teachers are worried, they should tell students what they noticed that is concerning and then remind students that they are available to help, Head says.

[Learn [how high school educators should address traumatic events in class.](#)]

While it may be difficult, adults need to let the student take the lead with conversations, Head advises. Teachers should monitor changes in students' academic and social performance, Cox says, and, if needed, provide additional support that is specific to each student's needs.

For instance, teachers shouldn't assume all students want or need changes to their academic responsibilities after a traumatic event, Cox says. For some, a sense of normalcy at school can help them cope, says Cox.

However, the school environment could be a trigger for students dealing with trauma, such as those who have experienced war or gun violence, says Head.

Educators should establish a routine for students and make adjustments, as needed, to the school environment to help teens feel safe and secure, he says. They could do this by adding ambient lighting, eliminating the bell schedule and playing calming music – anything that's soothing.

Parents should anticipate changes in their child's academic performance following a traumatic event, Cox notes. However, school officials should also be aware of and ready to handle this issue.

While parents should monitor their child's overall well-being, they should first attend to teens' social and emotional health, Cox says. If academic or emotional issues persist, parents may want to seek assistance from a school counselor, who may refer a therapist.

Teachers may also want to enlist the help of the [school counselors](#), since these individuals are trained to help students with academic, personal and social issues, Cox says.

Additionally, parents and teachers can help students deal with trauma by helping them practice mindfulness, which is a reflective state that allows students to become more aware of themselves and their experience, Head says.

Meditation and breathing exercises are some techniques adults can teach students. Head recommends parents and teachers shore up their skills and check out resources from the [Mayo Clinic](#) and [MindUP](#) on mindfulness, along with searching for guided meditation clips on YouTube.

"The best intervention for students in trauma is to have a conscious adult in their life," Head says.