

## **Addressing the Emotional and Psychological Needs of Students, Staff and Families**

An integral part of preparing for and responding to any crisis includes a component that addresses the emotional and psychological needs of those who are directly or indirectly impacted. During and following a crisis, commonly experienced emotions include fear, panic, confusion, exhaustion, grief and loss, and depression. Reactions to loss of income, lack of medical assistance, loss of physical health, loss of routine and fear of the unknown can become paramount in one's daily life. Although it is impossible to prevent these emotional reactions, it is possible and prudent to help people prepare for the emotional stress, and to provide counseling and resources to persons impacted.

### **Emotional Responses to a Pandemic Influenza**

Unlike many natural or man made disasters, a pandemic will be a long term event affecting large portions of the population. It often does not have a clear beginning or end, but rather begins small, escalates, and slowly de-escalates. It may continue for close to a year, with periods of less intensity followed by high concentrations of illness. Below are psychosocial issues that need to be addressed when preparing for a pandemic flu:

- Illness and death among colleagues and family members
- Fear of contagion and/or of transmitting disease to others
- Shock, numbness, confusion, or disbelief; extreme sadness, grief, anger, or guilt; exhaustion; frustration
- Sense of ineffectiveness and powerlessness
- Difficulty maintaining self-care activities (e.g., getting sufficient rest)
- Prolonged separation from family
- Concern about children and other family members
- Constant stress and pressure to keep performing
- Domestic pressures caused by school closures, disruptions in day care, or family illness
- Stress of working with sick or agitated persons and their families and/or with communities under quarantine restrictions
- Concern about receiving vaccines and/or antiviral drugs before other persons

These issues may be exacerbated by:

- Lack of information
- Rumors, misconceptions, or conspiracy theories
- Loss of faith in health institutions, employers, or government leaders
- Belief that medical resources are not available or fairly distributed
- Death of immediate supervisors or other leaders in the response effort
- Mass casualties and deaths among children
- Economic collapse or acute shortages of food, water, electricity, or other essential services
- Restrictions on civil liberties that are perceived to be inequitable
- Infection control procedures that limit personal contact or hinder communications
- Overstimulation from the media

### **Building Emotional Support into an Emergency Plan**

Psychosocial support services should be incorporated into emergency preparedness planning for an influenza pandemic. The importance of communication before, during and after a pandemic event cannot be overemphasized. Healthcare and public health planners should also contact community-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations to determine the types of psychological and social support services and training courses available in their jurisdictions. Healthcare and public health officials should plan for information sharing with emergency planners in schools. Planning for the provision of psychosocial support services might include the following activities:

- Ensuring that administrators, managers, and supervisors are familiar with and actively encourage the use of tools and techniques for supporting students, staff and their families during times of crisis
- Training mental health staff in behavioral techniques to help students and employees cope with grief, stress, exhaustion, anger, and fear during an emergency
- If feasible, providing minimal training in psychological support services to persons who are not behavioral health professionals (what to say, when to refer, signs of depression, post-traumatic stress, etc.)
- Identifying additional resources that can be available to students, employees and their families during and after a pandemic
- Developing strategies to assist staff who have child-care or elder-care responsibilities or other special needs that might affect their ability to work during a pandemic.
- Attempt to keep as normal a routine as possible in school and at home.