

Communicating Crisis to Youth: The role of caregiver crisis communication in youth sensemaking and recovery

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Abstract: A qualitative study was conducted of the response to student deaths by the administrators of two rural high schools. The events are looked at in the dual context of incident management and communication processes, using Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory. Interviews were conducted with administrators and with members of a student support team that responded to these and similar events. The study finds that negotiation of meaning that takes place between students, and between students and caregivers, is key in students' processing of the event that they are experiencing. It can also equip them to be more resilient to traumatic events in the future.

Keywords — crisis, youth, sensemaking, caregiver, coordinated management of meaning

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INTRODUCTION

A traumatic event for a child, generally absent the logistical responsibilities required of adults, is primarily an emotional experience. A traumatic event may evoke lasting feelings of fear, sadness, and anger, among others. To recover from the event and demonstrate resilience, children must be able to understand, appropriately express, and come to regulate their own emotions related to that event [1]. They must create a retrospective narrative of the event that allows them to move forward from it, and which will become part of the mental model they will apply to future traumatic events.

This paper looks at the subject of resilience in children. It proposes that emotional competence in children is strongly correlated with resilience, and that emotional competence can be fostered through the way that traumatic events are communicated between caregivers and children. Narrative is a tool that helps the child make sense of a traumatic event. The narrative sets the boundaries of acceptable emotion for a child. Whether the caregiver frames the incident as a tragic accident or a malicious act sets the emotional expectations for those involved. Children will retell the narrative to themselves and their peers, often reinterpreting what is said or inserting other information, real or imagined, to make sense of the event for themselves.

Whether intentionally or not, adults will also model the expression and regulation of emotion in response to the event. When negative events are framed with a positive valence it models emotional competence, and children are more likely to develop emotional competence themselves [2].

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The goal of this study is to examine the communication strategies implemented by school administrators following a student death, and to understand the choices and priorities of administrators in selecting those strategies. The intended outcome is a set of guidelines for parents that can help them make sense of these events for their children in order to foster emotional competence.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What are caregiver's priorities and goals (whether deliberate or intuitive) when communicating to children?

RQ2: What communication strategies do they use?

RQ3: What is the relationship between the actions of caregivers and the creation of meaning/sensemaking by children?

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METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviews were conducted with four school administrators from two schools. Five interviews were also conducted with members of the Hope Animal Assisted Crisis Response team, which responded to both schools. Hope provides emotional support to children who have experienced trauma by making comfort dogs available. Hope team members provided valuable insights through their observations of the school response and their conversations with students. Three of the Hope members interviewed were school teachers, one was a professional psychologist. One team member had deployed to both school events; two more had deployed to School #1 only.

RESULTS

The incident involving School #1 took place in early February, 2019. Two teenaged brothers fell through the ice on a river. A 15-year old friend accompanying them was able to pull the two to safety, but fell through the ice himself and was carried away by the current. His body would not be recovered for another three months. The town where the incident occurred has a population of less than 2,000 people and all three boys attended the local high school. The incident took place on a Thursday evening, and the following day was a snow day. Students did not return to school until the following Monday, but the school's response began immediately upon learning of the student's death on Thursday evening.

The principal attended a basketball game on Friday evening in order to interact with students, and the school hosted a get-together for students on Saturday, facilitated by a local youth pastor. On Monday, crisis counsellors and a comfort dog team were at the school when students returned. Students were given an opportunity engage in both collective and individual expressions of grief.

The principal's goal for her students was to support them in making sense of the event. Because the boy had died saving others, she was concerned that her students might become angry at the survivors, or that the survivors would blame themselves for what had happened. She was careful that she and her staff frame the incident as a tragic accident. In spite of this framing, some students and staff members still expressed anger over the death. In a counselling session for students who were closest to the boy, his girlfriend angrily blamed one of the boys who had been with him for not trying to rescue him. Framing was important in messaging again when the student's body was recovered. The school took their cue from a social media message posted by the family and described the recovery as a "joyful" development, and a "relief".

The incident at School #2 took place over the school's spring break in March, 2019. The school district in which this incident took place serves two rural towns with a combined population of fewer than 800 people. The high school principal and vice-principal, who are also the school's football coaches, had taken a group of 20 students on a week-long trip to Florida, accompanied by parents. A police officer from the community contacted the principal to let him know that a student had committed suicide. The student, a 17-year old boy, was in his junior year. He was a popular athlete and had been a teammate of many of the students on the Florida trip.

The principal informed the students who were with him in Florida. His message was that the student had, "made the decision to take his own life." The principal discovered that the student had online conversations with 20 to 30 students and staff members on the day of his death. He did not indicate to anyone that he intended to take his life.

School staff held an open house in memory of the deceased student one day during spring break. Representatives from the local crisis response team, community mental health agency, and the county Department of Human Services were present, as well as school staff members. The funeral took place on the following Sunday, after the group had returned from Florida. When school resumed on Monday both a crisis team and a comfort dog team were available for students. Students were encouraged to take advantage of these resources as needed. Staff members were asked to send any student that appeared to be having trouble to meet with one or both of the teams or to speak to him or the vice-principal. The administrators visited each class that morning and let students know that they supported them and let them know what resources were available. About 24 students met with counsellors, and several sought out one of the administrators over the first two days back at school.

School had largely returned to normal by the end of the day on Tuesday. However, students continued to discuss the event on social media, expressing anger at several people whom they felt were to blame for the boy's death. The primary object of these accusations was the boy's girlfriend. Administrators responded by speaking to each student who posted a negative social media message and asking them to take it down. Although they were able to curb the behaviour of posting negative messages, they acknowledge that they were not able to change the attitudes of those involved.

School administrators continued to observe anger in a small group of individuals over the summer. They did not feel that all discussions on social media were detrimental, even when they expressed negative emotions. They knew of several private online conversations that had gone on between students. Although these were largely negatively valenced in the beginning, administrators felt that they ultimately helped students to negotiate a proactive shared meaning for the event. These peer-to-peer conversations provided an opportunity for students to process their emotions in a non-judgmental environment.

DISCUSSION

The two schools studied here are similar in many ways. Both are located in a rural area and have a small student body, with the majority of students coming from low-income families. Both schools reported having students that do not have strong parental support at home.

RQ1: SCHOOL GOALS & PRIORITIES

The incident response strategies of the two schools were very similar. Administrators from both schools immediately contacted the staff they would need to help them with response. The fact that both contacted a crisis counselling team and a comfort dog team is likely due to both schools being part of the same intermediate school district (ISD). Both requested assistance from the ISD. Both schools experienced a delay between the incident and school returning to session. This gave students a chance to process the event outside of school. Both schools provided support services to students in the interim.

Administrators in both schools strive to create an empathetic culture, and encourage close relationships between students and staff. Principal #1 describes her routine at the end of each school day in which she stands in the hallway with her arms outstretched, and calls out, “High fives and hugs!” Principal #2 agrees on the importance of close relationships with students, but acknowledges the emotional toll that it can take on staff when students are going through difficult times. For that reason, he makes sure that staff has resources that they can draw on for their own support. Principal #1 did not discuss the effect on staff, but admitted to being close to quitting at the end of the school year herself, due to the emotional toll.

RQ2: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Administrators in both schools created a narrative that was intended to avoid blaming other students. However, in both cases, alternate narratives were created by students in which a peer was responsible. Anger is an acknowledged part of normative grief. In most cases it is temporary; however, as an individual tries to find meaning in an unexpected death, anger may come to provide that meaning. They may feel driven to correct whatever wrong they believe led to the death. Anger may anchor a bereaved person to their loss, not allowing them to process their grief and move forward [3].

Staff at School #1 consciously tried to guard against anger as they helped students make sense of the death of their peer. Although the story was well known, the administration chose not to focus on the fact that the student had died saving two of his classmates, in order to avoid their being blamed for his death. School #2 administrators were not as intentional in their attempt to avoid possible anger, although they offered a narrative in which the responsibility was solely on the boy who had taken his own life. In follow-up discussions with students who were posting negatively on social media, they did not offer an alternative narrative to those being constructed by the students. They simply said that the situation was more complicated than it appeared and that they (the students) did not—and likely never would—have all the information. This strategy may have ultimately supported sensemaking for some, but was not completely successful in curbing anger.

Emotional Modelling

The exchanges between administrators and students posting negative messages indicate that there was less emotional negotiation at School #2. There was also less emotion displayed in front of students by administrators in School #2 than School #1. Principal #1 recounts incidents in which her students made sure that she was okay or comforted her, including the brother of the boy who had died. The vice-principal of School #2 described the atmosphere in the school after the events as, “Business as usual, but in a caring environment.” Principal #1 used emotion talk to help students make sense of their feelings. Since both the principal and vice principal at School #2 are male, they may feel that it is less appropriate to show physical affection to students. Even Principal #1 acknowledges that her ‘high fives and hugs’ are intentionally given in view of the hallway camera to avoid any perception of misconduct.

RQ3: COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING (CMM) OF DEATH IN SCHOOLS

At the broadest level, CMM finds the rules of meaning to be based in cultural attitudes. Hannig states that in the U.S. death has come to be viewed as the outcome only when modern medicine, modern technology, or modern psychology fails [4]. Individuals will form their own beliefs about death based on larger cultural attitudes.

In communicating about the event, how students interpret and respond to information will depend on the context of the conversation. The negotiation of meaning in a school environment takes place in both a staff-student and in a peer-to-peer environment. The peer-to-peer exchanges observed in both schools were markedly different than students’ exchanges with school staff. Even in the more emotionally-open environment of School #1, students created alternate narratives, with different emotional boundaries, which were not shared with school staff.

Students in both schools were reported to be more open with volunteer response team members than with staff. The novel and temporary nature of their presence likely contributed, as did the presence of the team’s dogs. Hope team members report that, in their experience, having comfort dogs available during a communication episode typically makes children more likely to discuss difficult subjects. Whatever the mechanism, children were willing to talk about their feelings

regarding the events when dogs were present at both schools. Administrators from both schools spoke highly of the dog/handler teams as means of emotional support.

At School #1, students were able to discuss their own narratives of what had happened and were able to negotiate an understanding of the event in conversations in the presence of, or guided by, crisis team members. In the exchange between the girlfriend of the student who drowned and the survivors, the girl expressed to one of the survivors that she felt he should have tried to save his friend. He responded that he couldn't swim and if he had tried to save him, he would have certainly died as well. Whether this exchange brought closure to either is not clear, but it demonstrates the negotiation of meaning.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Administrators are not solely responsible for the negotiation of meaning in a traumatic event at school. However, administrators in these two schools created an environment in which students had a good chance of success at negotiating those meanings for themselves. Each set of administrators modelled emotional expression and regulation to different degrees, but both in positive ways. Administrators at School #1 used narrative more intentionally, and seemingly more successfully, than administrators at School #2. In both cases, students created alternate narratives, based on their own understandings of the event, but students at School #2 were less successful in negotiating a shared meaning, leading to lasting emotional distress for at least one student.

Like school administrators, parents cannot negotiate meaning on behalf of their children, but they can support an environment in which the child can negotiate meaning for themselves. There are several tools they can use to do this.

Narrative. Parents who encourage children to tell their own narratives about the event and who can listen to them without judgment will have a better likelihood of helping the child negotiate the meaning of the event in a way that will contribute to their resilience to such events in the future. Parents should be aware of the valence of the narrative they are using when discussing negative events, and that the narrative will set the boundaries for acceptable emotional response [5].

'Always Available Adult'. School administrators and trauma volunteers were unanimous in their agreement that the difference between a vulnerable and resilient child is an adult who was engaged in their lives [6].

Parental Response to Traumatic Events. Just as narrative sets the boundaries of acceptable emotion, emotional modelling sets the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Talking about specific emotions can help children identify what they are feeling and gives them the power to express it in a proactive way [7].

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates a strong correlation between emotional competence and resilience. Parents and caregivers who can model emotional competence for the children in their care teach skills that will serve a child throughout their lives. While caregivers cannot make sense of an event for a child, they can model appropriate behaviour and they can stock the recovery environment with resources that foster the creation of a proactive narrative.

Author Biography

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