

# Teachers often struggle to address mass traumatic events in class

June 2 2022, by Jennifer Greif Green, Jonathan S. Comer and Melissa Holt

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After the [Paris attacks of 2015](#)—a series of attacks in which gunmen opened fire on nightspots and a concert hall in Paris—a U.S.-based high school teacher of French described her failure to discuss the attacks in class as a "lost opportunity."

"I was working through my own feelings and did not know how to approach it," she told us in a survey after the attacks. "I only talked about it when the students brought it up and I kept conversations short.

"I think I should have been more open, honest, and offered more opportunities for students to process and take some action, even if it was a moment of silence, to honor the victims and help the families and survivors," the [teacher](#) continued. "I let my fear of not knowing what to do guide me and I regret it."

Such feelings are by no means uncommon among schoolteachers after a mass traumatic event has occurred, as we have learned as researchers who specialize in student [mental health](#) and [well-being](#).

This teacher was just one of [almost 100 U.S.-based teachers of French](#) whom we surveyed after the [2015 Paris attacks](#). We also surveyed [about 150 Massachusetts teachers](#) following the [2013 Boston Marathon bombing](#).

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends that teachers [make time to talk](#) to students about high-profile acts of violence, including attacks against schools, such as the [May 2022 massacre at Robb Elementary School](#) in Uvalde, Texas. However, the teachers whom we surveyed regularly told us that initiating these conversations is difficult.

In response to our surveys, the teachers wrote about the challenges of entering their classroom the morning after a crisis. Here is what they told us:

## **1. There is no typical way that students will respond**

Psychologists are clear that, after a mass trauma, a [wide range of](#)

[feelings and responses](#) is normal.

For teachers, this means that in a classroom of 25 students, there might be 25 different reactions. Students may also differ in their knowledge and understanding of what happened in the event. Whereas parents can focus on just their own children, teachers need to navigate complex conversations with many students at once, realizing that some students may be deeply affected, while others have little reaction.

For example, after the [Boston Marathon attack](#) in April 2013, a teacher wrote about the challenges of anticipating how her students would respond: "Because the students I serve have trauma histories and emotional disabilities, it is very difficult to determine the impact of the events in April on students, as so many other factors play a role."

## **2. There is no script to address trauma**

Conversations about crises are unpredictable. Teachers don't know what topics and questions students will raise and are often left to find their own materials. One teacher wrote about preparing to return to school following the Boston Marathon attack: "I spent a lot of time and energy working on a plan for my class on my own, but I know that other teachers who did not have the luxury to do so, or who were less experienced teachers, were much more worried about going into school than I was."

Other teachers commented on their uncertainty entering the classroom. A teacher of middle and high school French wrote after the Paris attacks: "*had many students ask me about the attacks and I spoke with them privately about the tragedy but said that I didn't feel comfortable discussing the events as an entire class. If I had more resources or time or training to address these events with teens I would love to be able to without the fear of offending someone or having a student say something*

*insensitive."*

### ***3. Students are not the only audience***

*While students are the focus of teachers' attention, families may have strong opinions about if or how schools talk about mass trauma. Even when school staff members know how to navigate conversations with students based on [best practices](#) and developmental considerations, families may have their own opinions about what is appropriate to discuss in school.*

*An elementary school French teacher wrote about her concern that she would provide more information than parents would like: "I told them that if they had questions, they should talk to their parents, because I wanted to respect the parents' wishes as far as how much the kids knew."*

*An [elementary school](#) science teacher wrote a similar response after the Boston Marathon attack: "I was also always fearful that one [student](#) who knew all about the attacks would start talking about it with students who had no idea what had happened and I would be stuck trying to mediate the situation, wary of what parents would say if students come home talking about the event after parents had decided not to expose their child to it."*

### ***4. Events are linked to broader social, political and cultural contexts***

*As teachers prepared to discuss a traumatic event, they said they also needed to be ready to discuss the context of the event. For example, a middle and high school teacher of French wrote that she "experienced strong conservative political reactions from students," which she said she wasn't expecting. "I expected to help them grieve, but I felt unprepared to navigate a debate on gun control in one class and bombing Syria in*

*another. ... I tried to offer counterpoints while simultaneously being unaware of how far I can push before getting into hot water."*

## ***5. Teachers are affected, too***

*Often teachers live and teach in communities directly affected by traumatic events. Or, as with the Uvalde, Texas massacre, teachers may themselves feel scared or affected by [events](#). For example, an eighth and ninth grade French and Spanish teacher wrote after the Paris attacks that she, "as an adult, was much more traumatized than the kids." "To me it was another 9/11 moment," she said. "I was the one feeling lost, shocked and upset." A first grade teacher similarly wrote after the Boston Marathon attack: "Most of the students wanted school to resume as normal—they wanted consistency and something familiar. It was the adults that needed the most help comprehending, processing and dealing with the events."*

*When we asked teachers how their schools can better support them, two messages came across clearly. First, leadership is essential. Several teachers noted the importance of school leaders meeting with staff to discuss their feelings and prepare to respond before resuming school. They also discussed the importance of school leaders sending out communications to educators and families, explaining how the school will respond.*

*Second, teachers want to know what to say. An April 2022 study found that only five states required future teachers to [receive training in how to respond to trauma](#). Teachers expressed that they want training and guidance in how to discuss traumatic events with students, including how to open the conversation, how to respond to difficult questions, and how to support [students](#) throughout the discussion. For example, a fifth grade teacher wrote after the Boston Marathon attack: "Training! We have no training on this. We get emails from our superiors that tell us to address the*

*events, with not much training on how to do it. I feel like I'm good at this type of thing—but not all teachers in my [school](#) are. ... The result is that some kids get their needs met by their teacher and some don't."*

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Teachers often struggle to address mass traumatic events in class (2022, June 2)  
retrieved 6 May 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2022-06-teachers-struggle-mass-traumatic-events.html>

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