

5 years after Parkland shooting, a school psychologist offers insights on helping students and teachers deal with grief

February 14 2023, by Philip J. Lazarus



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Whenever a school shooting takes place, school officials often arrange for grief counseling services to be made available for whoever needs

them. But what exactly do those services entail?

To answer that question, The Conversation reached out to Philip J. Lazarus, a school psychology professor at Florida International University who counseled students and educators affected by the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which took place in Parkland, Florida, on Valentine's Day, 2018.

Below, Lazarus recounts some of the experiences he had as he provided grief counseling. He also offers insights on what students and educators need as the nation confronts record levels of shootings with higher and higher death tolls.

Shattered sense of security

A few days after Parkland, a seventh grade boy at a nearby school told me his plan for how to make schools safer.

"We need to have a [conveyor belt](#) to check all kids for guns, then we need to have bulletproof windows on the outside, then we need to have bulletproof closets that we can all run into in case a shooter enters the building," the boy told me at the time. "We need to put up a 10-foot barbed wire fence outside the playground, and more police."

I wondered if this is the future we as a society want. Five years later, more elements of that future are now here.

In Newport News, Virginia, for example, officials decided to install 90 walk-through [metal detectors in schools across the district](#). The measure comes in response to one of the most shocking cases of a [school shooting](#)—one in which a first grader reportedly shot and wounded his teacher, Abigail Zwerner, at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News on Jan. 6, 2023.

In Texas, tens of millions of dollars were spent on [providing schools with ballistic shields](#) for school police officers. Some schools have installed [bulletproof "safety pods"](#) to protect students against active shooters.

When tragedies like the ones in Parkland, Newport News and Uvalde, Texas, take place, they don't just affect the school itself—they affect surrounding schools as well. Which is why, when I returned a few days after the Parkland shooting, from the National Association of School Psychologists convention in Chicago to Broward County, where I live and where the Parkland shooting took place, I connected with Frank Zenere, one of my former students, an adjunct lecturer at Florida International University and the crisis coordinator for Miami-Dade County Public Schools, as well as a team from Nova Southeastern University and another team of school psychologists from Volusia County to provide [psychological intervention](#).

[These interventions](#) included debriefing students, which means students talking about their reactions to the horrific event, short-term individual and group counseling, and consultation with school leaders and parents about how to handle children's grief and how best to open reopen schools.

Fears and uncertainty

One thing all school-based [mental health providers](#) learn in crisis intervention is that all students have a story to tell, [even if they have problems articulating their thoughts](#).

The job of the mental health provider is to listen. However, listening is often not enough. After Parkland, some students in the surrounding area were afraid to enter their own schools. A few were concerned that they would be attacked by a copycat killer. Some students emotionally broke down.

One sixth grade boy I met at a nearby charter school was afraid to go into his school building, and I was contacted by the principal to help. The boy just stood outside. So, I walked up to him and started talking and asked him why he did not walk home if he was so afraid. He told me that his parents drove him to this charter school, and he lived more than 10 miles away. I asked him if I walked right next to him and did not leave his side if he would be willing to go inside the building. He agreed. We talked for about 30 minutes. He said, "My body does not feel well. It doesn't feel right, it feels crazy inside, and I cannot describe it."

I told him that his feelings were normal. Then he was asked to rate his level of well-being from 1 to 10 from when he arrived at school to now, with 1 meaning feeling great to 10 meaning feeling terribly scared and anxious. He responded that when he entered my temporary office in the school, it was an 11, and now after about 30 minutes of recounting his experiences, reactions and feelings with me, he was at a 5 or 6.

He told me that he was taking yoga classes, and I worked with that to his advantage. I taught him how to imagine yoga music reverberating through his body to help him calm down. I taught him how he could make the music go faster or slower, louder or softer, and how to regulate his breathing. This provided him a sense of control over his internal feelings. Through a series of other techniques, such as using deep breathing, he learned how to enter a highly relaxed state. He reported by the end of our 90-minute meeting that he was now a 2.

I asked him to practice what he had learned at least three times before he came to school the following day. The next day he saw me and rushed up and said, "I'm a 1."

Normalcy is elusive

Sadly, as my colleague Frank told me, for many others the interventions

will not be as easy or the responses as quick.

For example, young people directly affected by a tragedy, especially those in classrooms where students were killed, will require deep understanding, empathy and guidance from family, friends, teachers, religious leaders and mental health professionals as they struggle to cope. Some may require [years of therapy](#).

[Closure is a myth](#). The trauma and grief may never go away. Yet [young people](#) can learn lessons from the past and move forward with help from their friends, families, faith, communities and mental health providers. For all those affected, their lives will never be the same, but with care and understanding from others and by focusing on the future, they can recover and thrive.

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