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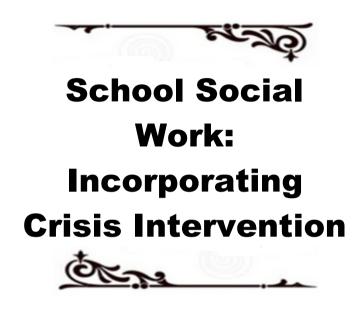
School Social Work: Incorporating Crisis Intervention

Abstract

This chapter delves into the critical role of crisis intervention in the field of school social work. The chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of the definition of crisis and the impact of such crises on students. Building on a clear narration of the theoretical underpinnings for crisis intervention, it delves into the methods and strategies that school social workers can employ to effectively intervene in crises. The chapter emphasizes the importance of collaboration with school staff and the development of crisis response plans.

Overall, this book chapter offers valuable insights into the crucial role of crisis intervention in school social work. The chapter underscores the importance of addressing crises in a timely and effective manner, emphasizing the need for school social workers to employ evidence-based methods and collaborate with school staff to support the well-being of students and their families.

Keywords: school social work, crisis intervention, crisis intervention theory, crisis intervention method, crisis intervention plans.

INTRODUCTION

Schools are subject to countless crises that require immediate action by school personnel (Gonzalez, 2021). These crises can manifest in many forms, including natural disasters, epidemics, violence, student suicides, personal trauma or community-wide events. Crises can wreak havoc on a school if not dealt with immediately (Javed & Niazi, 2015). Moreover, crises can disrupt students' learning experiences, emotional well-being, and development (Sokol et al., 2021). They deeply affect students' families and the entire school community. In such cases, school social workers play a critical and indispensable role in crisis intervention (Dombo et al., 2021).

School social workers work at the intersection of education and social services (Horton & Prudencio, 2022). They are uniquely positioned to promptly identify and respond to crises, providing vital support that helps students cope with the emotional distress and disruptions that crises inevitably bring (Dombo et al., 2021). To better understand this role, this chapter begins by defining what constitutes a crisis within the school and examining its multifaceted impact.

This chapter seeks to explore the concept of crisis intervention as a critical tool in the toolkit of school social work. The role of school social workers in crisis intervention is multidimensional and vital to the well-being and recovery of students, their families, and the school community. Therefore, the following sections of this chapter delve into the theoretical backing and specific components of crisis intervention in school social work, providing insights into the methods and strategies, and the development of crisis response plans.

Defining Crisis

Crisis is a term that is often used loosely, but it is essential to define it in the context of school social work. A crisis can be described as a situation in which a person's coping mechanisms are overwhelmed by an event or set of circumstances, leading to heightened emotional distress and functional impairment (Caplan, 1961). "A school crisis is a temporary event or condition that affects a school, causing individuals to experience fear, helplessness, shock and/or horror" (Kerr & King, 2018, p.2). A school crisis necessitates extraordinary actions to restore psychological and physical safety. The origins of the crisis are not necessarily school-based; Outside events and situations can create a crisis for a school (Kerr & King, 2018).

Impact of Crises on Students

Students can be significantly affected by crises, which may lead to emotional trauma, anxiety, depression, and other behavioural issues. Though school-based crises are acute events, their impact on student well-being can be long-lasting. Survivors of mass shootings and the affected communities may experience long-term adverse psychological effects (Lowe & Galea, 2015). Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression can occur following natural disasters (Makwana, 2019). These traumas may disrupt students' metacognitive learning processes, leading to academic difficulties (Panlilio et al., 2019). Therefore, addressing students' mental health needs after a crisis is critical to prevent long-term traumatic effects. School-based crisis interventions can be an effective way to restore the well-being of students (Powell & Bui, 2016).

Theoretical Underpinning for Crisis Intervention

A theoretical base for crisis intervention has evolved over the years, shaped by the contributions of various scholars and influenced by societal changes and significant events (Sandoval, 2013). A synthesis of theories and perspectives in crisis intervention is as follows:

Early Foundations: Lindemann and Erikson (1940s-1960s)

The earliest work on crisis intervention is credited to Erich Lindemann and Erik Erikson. Lindemann conducted systematic observations of the reactions of victims and their families to the Coconut Grove nightclub fire, forming the basis for his ideas about crisis and crisis intervention. Erikson introduced the concept of specific crises characterizing each developmental stage in an individual's life, emphasizing crisis as a normal developmental phenomenon (Lindemann, 1944; Erikson, 1962).

Primary Prevention and Mental Health Consultation: Caplan (1960s)

Gerald Caplan's work in primary prevention of emotional disorders and mental health consultation led to the emergence of preventive psychiatry. Caplan's ideas, influenced by public health concepts, played a pivotal role in the development of crisis intervention centres nationwide, responding to the mental health needs of communities during a time of social unrest (Caplan, 1961, 1964).

Community Response to Social Challenges (1960s-1970s)

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the creation of crisis counselling agencies, often non traditional, on college campuses and in communities to address the problems of alienated youth, including drug overdose and illegal drug use. Telephone crisis lines also became prevalent during this period, with a growing interest in suicide prevention services (Beers & Foreman, 1976).

Brief Psychotherapy and Stress Theory (Late 1970s-1980s)

In response to mental health funding cuts, there was a growing interest in brief psychotherapy. Mental health workers recognized that significant progress could be made in a short period. Additionally, there was an increased focus on stress and its impact on physical and mental health. Researchers like Hans Selye and Adolph Meyer contributed to understanding how environmental events, including life transitions and stressors, can have broader effects on well-being (Selye, 1974; Moos & Schaefer, 1986).

Posttraumatic Stress and School Violence (1980s-1990s)

Definitions of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were refined, with more attention given to the effects of trauma, particularly in children and youth. High-profile acts of school violence, such as the Columbine High School shooting, drew attention to the prevention of violence and the impact of bullying (Fletcher, 2003).

Response to Extreme Events (2000s-Present)

The first decade of the 21st century was marked by extreme events, including the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina. These events prompted increased efforts to prepare professionals, including psychologists, to respond to disasters and focus on the effects of trauma, especially on children who witness traumatic events (Eisenberg & Silver, 2011).

Integration into School Psychology (Present)

The culmination of these theories and practices has led to the development of crisis response teams in many schools, with school psychologists and mental health workers applying crisis intervention techniques to the school setting (Brock et al., 2009).

As theories continue to develop, the field of crisis intervention remains essential in providing support and recovery for those in distress.

Methods and Strategies for Crisis Intervention

School-based crisis interventions are interventions or approaches focused on improving the well-being of the whole school community after a crisis experience (Sokol et al., 2021). Social workers adopt various methods and strategies in school-based crisis intervention.

Assessment and Triage

Assessment and triage are fundamental components of crisis intervention in school social work. The assessment process includes data collection and systematic evaluation to understand the nature and severity of the crisis, while triage prioritizes interventions based on urgency and student needs. The information gathered through assessment can detail the circumstances surrounding the crisis, the emotional impact on students, any existing mental health conditions, and resources available for intervention (James & Gilliland, 2019).

The assessment phase involves activities such as observation, interviewing, and secondary data reviewing. School social workers can carefully observe students, their interactions and behaviour to identify the signs of distress and emotional responses to the crisis. Further, engaging in one-on-one interviews with students, parents, teachers, and other school staff can provide valuable insights into the context of the crisis and its immediate consequences. These conversations offer a platform for individuals to express their concerns, feelings and needs. Additionally, collecting data from various sources such as school records, medical histories, and community resources can help paint a comprehensive picture of the student's needs and any pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Once the assessment is complete, the information gathered can be used to triage the crisis. Triage is the process of prioritizing interventions based on the urgency and severity of the situation. It involves classifying students into different categories based on their immediate needs and risks. The triage process helps school social workers allocate their time and resources efficiently. Therefore, assessment and triage are dynamic processes that help school social workers determine the most appropriate course of action in the face of the crisis. They provide the foundation for tailoring the interventions to meet the unique needs of each student, ensuring that resources and support are allocated efficiently to maximize the impact of crisis intervention.

Crisis Counselling

Crisis counselling is a pivotal component of crisis intervention in school social work. It provides immediate and short-term emotional support for students experiencing high levels of distress due to a crisis. The primary purpose of crisis is to ease emotional turmoil, help students regain control, and empower them to cope. School social workers create a safe and confidential space where students can express their feelings, thoughts and concerns without judgment or fear of repercussions. Building trust and a supportive environment is essential to fostering open communication. School social workers engage in active listening, empathizing with students and validating their emotions. By acknowledging and validating their feelings, students feel more understood and supported. Providing information about common reactions to crises, the normalcy of their emotional responses, and strategies for managing stress and anxiety can be immensely helpful (James & Gilliland, 2019). Educating students about the nature of the crisis and its potential effects is a fundamental aspect of crisis counselling.

Crisis counselling aims to stabilize the immediate emotional turmoil experienced by students. Techniques such as grounding exercises, deep breathing, and mindfulness can be taught to help students regain emotional equilibrium. School social workers assist students in developing and practising effective coping strategies that can be employed in the face of overwhelming emotions. These strategies may include problem-solving, relaxation techniques, or seeking support from trusted individuals (James & Gilliland, 2019). In cases where students' emotional distress is severe or persists beyond the crisis, crisis counsellors may recommend referral to mental health professionals for more specialized and long-term therapy (Sandoval, 2013).

Resource Coordination

Resource coordination is a critical aspect of crisis intervention within the realm of school social work, ensuring that students, families, and school communities receive the necessary support and services during and after a crisis. School social workers play a central role in identifying, mobilizing, and coordinating resources to assist individuals impacted by crises within the school setting. This component of crisis intervention is pivotal in facilitating recovery and promoting resilience among students and the broader school community (Brock, 2013). School social workers are responsible for connecting students and families with the services and support they require.

Effective resource coordination often involves collaborating with teachers, school administrators, and other staff members. School social workers

work in tandem with school personnel to ensure that students receive the necessary academic accommodations and emotional support. Building partnerships with local agencies, mental health professionals, and community organizations is also essential. These collaborations expand the range of available resources, ensuring a more comprehensive response to the crisis. School social workers may advocate on behalf of students and their families to ensure that they can access the resources they need. This advocacy includes assisting with the navigation of systems, supporting families in applying for services or benefits, and addressing any barriers to resource access.

Crisis Intervention Plans

A critical component of crisis intervention by school social workers is the development and implementation of crisis response plans. These plans are comprehensive strategies that guide how a school and its personnel respond to and manage various types of crises, ensuring a well-organized, coordinated, and effective response to crises when they occur (Brock, 2013). The key elements in developing crisis intervention plans are given below.

Assessing Risk

Crisis response plans typically begin with a thorough risk assessment. School social workers, along with other school personnel, evaluate potential crisis scenarios, assess their severity, and identify vulnerable areas within the school community. This process allows them to prepare for a range of crises, from natural disasters to incidents involving student mental health or safety concerns.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

Crisis intervention plans clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of various individuals and teams within the school community. This includes the specific duties of school social workers, teachers, administrators, support staff, and external agencies. Having clearly defined roles ensures a coordinated and efficient response during a crisis.

Setting Communication Protocols

Effective communication is crucial during a crisis. Crisis response plans specify communication protocols, including how information is disseminated to parents, guardians, and the broader community. It also includes guidelines for coordinating with external agencies, law enforcement, and emergency responders.

Mapping Resources

The plans identify available resources within the school and community that can be mobilized during a crisis. This includes mental health services, counselling resources, medical support, and access to emergency funds. School social workers play a key role in facilitating access to these resources.

Training and Drills

To ensure that the crisis response plan is well-executed, school personnel, including school social workers, receive training on their roles and responsibilities. Regular drills and exercises, such as fire drills or lockdown drills, help familiarize students and staff with the plan and ensure a quick and coordinated response.

Discussion

Crisis intervention by school social workers is of paramount importance in addressing the immediate and long-term needs of students, families, and school communities during difficult and traumatic situations. The *PREPaRE* model of school crisis prevention and intervention (Brock et al., 2009) emphasizes the responsibility of the school crisis management team to prevent and prepare for psychological trauma, reaffirm physical health and perceptions of safety and security, evaluate psychological trauma risk, provide interventions, and respond to psychological needs, examine the effectiveness of crisis prevention and intervention. However, School social workers are often the first responders to crises within the school community.

The researchers' experience with hundreds of parents arriving at once to find their children following a school shooting confirms the importance of crisis preparedness and intervention (Sandoval et al, 2013). Bohnenkamp et al., (2021) prove the effectiveness of a crisis response and prevention intervention that enhanced the emotional and behavioural health of students. Moreover, the literature emphasizes the criticality of teaching effective coping strategies, fostering supportive relationships, and helping children process their emotions to facilitate a healthy adjustment after a natural disaster (Lazarus et al., 2002). Crisis intervention helps students understand and adapt to the new reality while providing strategies to cope with adversity (James & Gilliland, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Crisis intervention is a fundamental tool in the arsenal of school social workers, enabling them to provide vital support to students facing various

crises. This chapter underscores the need for crisis intervention in addressing the immediate and long-term needs of students and highlights its effectiveness in providing immediate support, building resilience, offering preventative education, coordinating resources, and implementing crisis response plans. The social workers' skill set and knowledge equip them to provide essential support and contribute to the well-being and academic success of students in times of crisis.

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