



# Post-traumatic stress disorder

## This activity will help you to...

- Apply your understanding of traumatic stress to real world situations
- Consider the strengths and limitations of the PTSD diagnosis
- Consider the strengths and limitations of CIST for traumatic stress

## Institutional responses to traumatic events

People who work in schools and colleges generally hope that those they work with – colleagues and students – have happy, healthy and successful lives. But educational institutions are occasionally touched by tragedy. Sometimes this happens indirectly, as when a student or staff member dies by accident or of illness. Or it can be more direct, as when people are killed or injured taking part in trips or activities or – albeit rarely – when students or teachers are deliberately killed and injured on school or college premises (as happened at Virginia Tech in April 2007 and Dunblane Primary in March 1996).

Incidents such as these, and a growing awareness of psychological approaches to traumatic stress, have led many schools and colleges to draw up plans for how they will respond to support survivors of traumatic events connected with their institution.

## You are the psychologist...

The vice-principal of Anytown College has been asked to draw up a policy for how her institution will respond in the event of a traumatic event that affects students and/or staff. She has written a draft policy, based on information she has obtained from the Internet. You have been asked, in your capacity as a psychologist specialising in traumatic stress, to comment on and, if necessary, suggest amendments to her policy before it is presented to the college executive.

## What you need to do...

1. Familiarise yourself with the main points of the psychological literature on traumatic stress and PTSD. You will need to read the article accompanying this activity but should also consult your textbook and any other sources you may have available (but be careful with Web-based sources and use only those that are trustworthy).
2. Read the draft policy printed overleaf. Make sure you understand (a) what recommendations are being made and (b) the reasoning behind them (this may require you to read between the lines to get at the assumptions made by the writer).
3. Write a response document in which...
  - You **must** suggest at least two changes to the draft policy, identifying what you think is wrong and explaining why your suggestions are more appropriate.
  - You **should** link your suggestions to psychological research by citing and explaining relevant evidence from the psychological literature.
  - You **could** make one or more additions to the policy to cover issues not considered by the writer, explaining why and citing relevant evidence as appropriate.

Your response document must be no more than 600 words long.

# Anytown College

## Traumatic Incident Response Policy (Draft Version)

This policy will be applied whenever students and/or staff of Anytown College have been affected by a traumatic event, which is defined for these purposes as one that is sudden and unexpected and which causes injury or loss of life amongst students and/or staff of the college.

1. Following the designation of an event as 'traumatic', the Event Response Team (ERT) will draw up a list of affected persons. This list will consist of all survivors who were present when the traumatic event took place.
2. As soon as possible following the event, the college counselling staff will debrief all affected persons following Critical Incident Stress Debriefing guidelines. If significant numbers of people are affected additional counselling support staff may be brought in under an agreement with the Anytown NHS Primary Care Trust.
3. All affected persons must be debriefed within 24 hours. This is particularly the case with those who resist discussing the event as this may indicate that they are particularly traumatised.
4. After a period of not more than 14 days from the originating incident, all affected persons will be assessed by an appropriately qualified psychiatrist. Those that meet the diagnostic criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder should be referred for further treatment under the supervision of the local Primary Care Trust Mental Health Team.
5. Those affected persons not diagnosed with PTSD should be removed from any ongoing support programmes to allow resources to be focused on those with the severest residual problems.