Social media resources in school crisis prevention and intervention work
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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has provided many educator- and parent-friendly resources over the years and school crisis resources are no exception (see: http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx/). However, guidance on social media use in school crisis work is currently quite limited. Thankfully, three NASP social media resources focusing on school crisis are currently in development. They are: Tips for Parents & Educators, Strategies for Administrators and Crisis Teams, and a more general Brief Facts and Tips sheet. This article is offered as “sneak peak” to those resources.

Background information

The U.S. Dept of Education Office of Safe and Healthy Students (2012) defined social media as “networking sites, messaging sites, texting, and other web-based or mobile technologies that support social interaction.” Not everybody uses social media, but a very high percentage of young people, parents, caregivers, and general community members are using social media more frequently with each passing day. If schools can embrace the power of social media, school crises can be prevented or responded to more effectively, minimizing psychological trauma in students and school staff members.

When school staff and community members think about social media in the context of school crises, they often view it as a notable cause or factor in the problem. Indeed, social media are a challenging “wildcard” in all school crisis prevention, preparation, and response efforts. Of significant concern is how social media can trigger or intensify crises or even contribute to “crisis contagion.” Undoubtedly, school staff members and parents can be left frustrated and intimidated by the challenges of using and monitoring social media.

While the author recognizes the difficulties schools face with student and community use of social media, the emphasis of this article will be more proactive. The focus will be on effective use of social media – to help prevent crises whenever possible, to prepare for crises that cannot be prevented, and to help with interventions after crises do happen. To that end, the PREPαRE school crisis prevention and intervention model (Brock et al, in press) will serve as a structure for ideas about how to harness the power of social media in school-based crisis work. While empirical research on the topic remains limited (see: Flitsch, Magnesi, & Brock, 2012), many promising social media practices exist and will be summarized next.

Using social media to prevent and prepare for school crises

As with any good tiered system of support, the PREPαRE model begins with crisis Prevention and Preparation. While it is not expected that any of the following prevention and preparedness examples are perfect or “fool proof,” it is likely they can help supplement and expedite communication. Examples of social media prevention and preparedness efforts include:

- Determine a “Social Media Manager” and include that person on your school safety team and crisis team. The social media manager must be trusted as an important communicator before and during school crises (see: Brinkworth, Morris, Singh, & Lieberman, 2014).
- A Social Media Manager can monitor social media to help determine unknown problems in your school and respond quickly and regularly to community postings to school-based social media (reinforcing student, parent, and community user participation).
Other prevention and preparedness ideas include pre-crisis posting of the school’s reunification plan and expectations in case of early release, posting electronic versions of school crisis prevention informational flyers (e.g., NASP handouts), and posting encouragement for healthy or expected student behaviors (e.g., in the weeks leading up to homecoming or prom).

Schools are encouraged to “stay tuned” as new school crisis response app’s and other electronic resources become available. Some existing tools with strong prevention and preparedness potential include:

- **SchoolGuard**. This free app is appropriate in school intruder scenarios and includes a single panic button that will immediately and simultaneously speed dial 911, inform other school staff members of the incident, and alert all nearby on- and off-duty law enforcement officers (See: [http://schoolguard.guard911.com/](http://schoolguard.guard911.com/))
- **CrisisGo for Education**. This paid app can help eliminate crisis plan “binders” by electronically organizing emergency contacts, crisis checklists, and maps. Additionally, it provides a two-way communication platform and live-streaming video. (See: [https://jimspicuzza-wqo8.squarespace.com/crisisgo-for-education/](https://jimspicuzza-wqo8.squarespace.com/crisisgo-for-education/))
- **K-12 alerts**. This paid app provides an anonymous reporting system for safety issues, bullying or other suspicious activities. It can be used by students, parents, and community members (See: [http://www.k12alerts.com/webcorp/anonymous.html](http://www.k12alerts.com/webcorp/anonymous.html)).
- **Google Alerts**. This free tool can be used to inform the Social Media Manager or others via email whenever problematic information is posted anywhere on-line, all based on key words used (e.g., “Kennedy Middle School suicide”). Try it out here: [https://www.google.com/alerts#](https://www.google.com/alerts#)

### Using social media to reaffirm physical health and perceptions of security and safety after a crisis

When a crisis or emergency does happen, it is important to determine when the threat has passed and when students and staff can be reaffirmed that “we are all safe now.” Within the PREPare model, this step must be completed before any psychological interventions can be expected to be effective. Examples of reaffirming the school community through use of social media include:

- Quickly post accurate and appropriate crisis event information
- Use Twitter hash tags to help others track crisis event information efficiently
- “Retweet” or link to helpful crisis event information from other sources
- Debunk inaccurate rumors quickly and repeatedly

### Using social media to evaluate psychological trauma risk

After a crisis threat has passed, school crisis teams must make decisions about what interventions students need. In the PREPare model, psychological triage is used to evaluate students who may be low-risk, moderate-risk, or high-risk. Examples of how schools can use social media to triage student level of risk after a crisis include:

- Monitor postings to school-based social media tools; reach out to those posting inappropriate, inaccurate, or intense information or reactions.
- Use Twitter hash tags to more efficiently monitor student and community responses to school-based postings
- Follow-up with moderate or high-risk students via social media to help evaluate ongoing needs (i.e., triage is a process, not a one-time event).
Using social media to provide interventions and respond to psychological needs

Responding to student and staff needs following a crisis must be based on evaluation data collected through the triage process. While interventions are usually conducted most effectively in-person, social media can provide a way to provide important and immediate psychoeducational interventions (i.e., information sharing and dispelling of rumors) to students, school staff members, and the community as a whole. Examples include:

- Direct users to electronic crisis informational flyers (e.g., “Coping with crisis: Tips for parents and educators”). Flyers may be posted in advance of a crisis (i.e., as part of prevention and preparedness efforts) or after a specific type of event. NASP has created numerous resources for nearly any crisis situation. See: [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx)
- A Social Media Manager can post crisis event updates as they become available, communicate the details of any in-person community informational gatherings, and celebrate positive recovery steps on social media (e.g., thanking volunteers, posting recovery photos).
- While using social media to provide higher-need psychological interventions remains controversial, some evidence has emerged reflecting its potential for mental health treatment (e.g., text messaging has been found to positively influence women in treatment for bulimia nervosa) (Flitsch, Magnesi, & Brock, 2012).

Reminders

Effective use of social media has become an essential asset before, during, and after school crises occur. Social media can help expedite accurate information sharing and minimize traumatic potential in the community. Additionally, careful use of social media can help create perceptions of social support that are so critical to crisis recovery. The keys to successful social media use in school crisis work include: determining social media tools that will reach the intended audience, recognition social media will not reach everyone (and continuing to use more general communications), building in social media resources (e.g., assigning a Social Media Manager), and ensuring schools use social media frequently (to engage students, parents, and the community and sustain their following). The reader is encouraged to monitor the NASP crisis resource web link for forthcoming social media resources (see: [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx)).

References


