April 21, 1999: I can’t believe we have a meeting this morning. I can’t believe there is electricity in my apartment or that water still flows out of my faucet. I peel apart the window blinds; I can’t believe the neighbor is walking his dog.

Teacher, Columbine High School

A suburban Colorado high school is ripped apart by gunfire and bombs as angry students embark on a murderous rampage. On the plains of Kansas, a tornado siren screams, shattering the peace of a summer afternoon and sending residents in a frantic rush to safety. At a seaside resort, the National Guard rumbles in to enforce mandatory evacuations as a Category 4 hurricane barrels toward the coast. Moments of chaos, fear, destruction—the sudden rending of the normal—leave the everyday almost unrecognizable and the future in doubt. Routine events, once so easily taken for granted, now appear strange and incomprehensible.

Between one heartbeat and the next, the world is transformed. Worldviews are shattered; plans are crushed beneath the reality of the moment, and it becomes difficult to imagine what the future will hold.

A life-threatening or life-altering event violates the everyday and can generate long-lingering challenges. In addition to those personally exposed to the threat, effects of trauma are often felt by family members and others who witness or hear of the heartbreak. Even if injury and loss are averted, warnings of impending disaster can trigger fear and uncertainty, especially among children and youth.
That no-man’s-land between event and resolution is the aftermath—the point where the pains of experience are still raw and angry, before the healing has taken hold, before the world begins to look livable again. Often a traumatic event commands front-page/prime-time coverage, and then slips from sight as other events move into the spotlight. The situation hasn’t been resolved; it’s merely been replaced by something more immediate.

Significance for schools

Hardships posed by disaster or traumatic loss persist. Lives are upended, security is threatened, and all are forced to find ways to adapt to a new sense of “normal.” Traumatic situations range from collective, massive upheaval of warfare or a terrorist attack to solitary personal experience of victimization or sudden loss. Some crises strike suddenly, but others are more subtle and ongoing. These may be suffered in the silence of unrelied anxiety and fear. Students whose parents are in the military, for example, often experience stress from knowing that parents have been—or may be—deployed to a war zone. Living in a high-crime area creates an elevated baseline of traumatic exposure. Children of undocumented workers may live in fear that their family will be deported. A quiet residential neighborhood, without identifiable sources of threat, may be the scene of recurring child abuse. For those living with chronic anxiety, any subsequent disruption may elevate the level of traumatization. Whether an event terrorizes an entire school population or only a single individual, educators need to be alert to stress responses and understand what they can do to help from an educational perspective.

Psychologists, social workers, and counselors are taught to assess the impact of traumatization and to provide treatment that helps victims move toward recovery. Educators, however, are generally not given any preparation for working with students who are suffering from traumatic stress. In the event of a disaster or serious loss, most schools and universities will bring in counselors to attend to immediate psychological concerns. For individual cases, educators know procedures for referring the student for special services. However, while mental health professionals may be available to assess and counsel, educators are rarely taught how to adjust their instructional practice to meet the special needs that arise.

While it may be comforting to believe that bad things only happen to other people, “Trauma is a universal experience. It is no respecter of rich or poor, of profession or occupation, of country of origin or family of origin, of talent or personal purpose” (Bussey & Wise, 2008, p. 3). And, while it is nice to think that we can protect children from harm, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that one in four school students in