Conversations in Classrooms After the Shooting in Bend

When frightening events happen, we sometimes wonder whether kids are worried and whether we should talk about it. One thing to realize is that often, they are talking about it on the bus and on the playground, but if we don't bring it up, we don't know they have concerns and they're trying to deal with it all on their own. We need them to know they can come to us so we can help them navigate this confusing world.

There are lots of ways to do this, but most of all, we want to encourage students to talk rather than hold their worries inside. Use what might work of this, but don't feel it all has to be a part of the conversation. Be sure to just take a deep breath and pause after each question to give students ample time to reflect, to find the right words, and to have the courage to talk. If no one speaks up right away, comments like, *"This is a hard one, isn't it?"* and then giving it space again can be helpful. Be patient!

For younger students, see notes at the bottom of page 2.

Start with a sentence of warning – *"I wanted to take a moment to mention something sad so we could all talk about it for a few minutes. How many of you have heard about what happened in Bend yesterday?*

Recount what happened – just very basic details.

Students may bring up facts or rumors or may surmise what happened. That's not unusual because we want to fill in the blanks and make the story hang together. With an understanding tone, clarify parts that are unknown, or not true or not verifiable, and remind them that we'll know more as the investigators learn more.

Statement of the obvious: *"When things like this happen, we have a range of reactions, emotions and thoughts. You might feel very differently than your friend. Emotions change and ebb and flow like waves on the shore. This is a good time for us to try to be really understanding of others who are dealing with this differently."* This could be a time to make a list on the board of all the different kinds of feelings kids have at times like this. *"This is a time to be our best selves."* That way, students are encouraged to bring up more or other than just their own feelings, which can feel safer.

Statement of assumption: It is sometimes helpful to make general statements of assumption that don't have to be right or wrong. *"Sometimes kids feel like they have to handle this stuff on their own so they don't tell parents or teachers how worried they are."* Or *"Sometimes when we think that we're the only one that feels upset, we don't want to tell our friends because they might think we're crazy."* This makes it easier for some students to speak up.

Make your students the experts: By asking what they think others are feeling, they can talk about their own emotions without feeling like they're actually self-disclosing. *"When things like this happen, what do you think kids your age worry about most?"*

Build trust and a sense of safety: *"What do you think would help kids feel safe?"* Don't make promises that their ideas will happen, but if it seems appropriate, let them know you'll make sure the principal knows of their concerns and their good ideas.

GUIDELINES

Remind them of their resilience: *"What are some of the things you've done that have helped you get through frightening times before? Or what have you heard that others have done that might be a good idea?"* This would be a great time to make a list on the board titled: What are all the ways we can come together and support one another?

Perhaps the most revealing question: *"What do you wish adults understood about how this is for you? What do you wish adults understood about what it is like to be your age?"*

Note that the lines of communication are always open: *"We'll all have more thoughts about all of this. I want to be sure all of you know that I want you to let me know what else is bothering you or what you are thinking or what you need. And we might talk about this again as a class. We'll check in again about this in coming days."*

Have an activity ready to go, to transition into some time for reflection and then toward the usual school learning and activities.

- Suggest that students who are old enough to journal, choose one of these prompts, or add your own ideas for a prompt:
  - People who are there for me, or people I can lean on
  - A healthy way I handled big feelings in the past and came out OK
  - If I could make a positive difference in the world, one thing I'd do is
  - Write down everything you appreciate about your world (or your life)
- Younger students could draw pictures about the prompts suggested above
- Let students call out attributes of people that we can trust with our feelings while you list them on the board. (People who are kind, who listen, who don't judge…)
- Draw the basics of a tree trunk and branches on flip chart sized paper and let kids draw leaves on the tree. Inside each left the student can put the name of someone that makes their life a little better, or that they trust or love – anybody they'd like to note. Then on the roots they could write words that describe what those people do that makes us want to put their name on the leaf?

There are also a couple of activities on the following pages.

For younger students: Of course you will need to amend the language, but more important is having a sense of whether the students know. At rug time you might ask general questions first to see whether any of them seem to know. *"Let's talk about feelings today. Who has some happy feelings today? What are those about? And who might be mad today? What makes people mad? And who feels anxious or nervous or maybe afraid today? And what is that about?"* If kids know about it, you want to be able to bring it up in class because otherwise, they'll hear about it on the playground or on the bus and then they won't have any adults to help them navigate their fears.

It is a judgment call. The younger the child, the less apt they may know, and it is difficult where to draw the line of deciding a group is too young for direct conversation. Mostly adults are surprised at how much little ones know, and if they know, we don't want them to worry in isolation.

You might want to use the aura body activity template and have them draw all the kinds of feelings they have and then ask questions to help them talk about sadness and fear. And use the nested circle activity to help them identify people they trust, people they can talk to… starting with art might be an easier lead into a conversation.

Aura Body Instructions

Read through the instructions before you lead the students in the activity.

What you'll need:

- The handout of the "empty" body
- If possible, colored pencils, crayons or felt pens, but just pencils will work
- Soft music you can play during one part of the activity – this is optional, but helpful

Step One: Introduce stress as a concept

Introduce that we're going to take a few minutes to look at stress and how we hold stress in our bodies. *"Stress is how our body tries to hang on and keep going when we're upset or overwhelmed. There are lots of things that create stress for us – who can think of some?"* Help students recognize things like taking a test or having a dog bark when we walk by their fence or not having our homework done. Some may immediately mention the shooting.

Step Two: Have them draw how they hold stress in their bodies.

Invite students to draw in where in their bodies they hold stress or anxiety. If you have colored pencils or felt pens available, invite them to choose the color that best represents it. At this point, depending on the group and the crisis at hand, students could talk about or show what they drew. Or you could ask for a show of hands, "How many of you hold stress in your tummy? Yes, that's common! And how many feel stress in your head?" etc.

Step Three: Have them focus on one place they hold stress and try to let go of it

Now give students a quiet moment to focus. Suggest that they close their eyes or look down so they can focus on what they feel in one place where they hold stress. Give them some ways to let go of the stress, like any of these:

- *"Take a really deep breath, way down into your lower belly. Imagine you're blowing up a balloon by inhaling through your tummy button – it makes your lower abdomen move out when you breathe in. And then each time you breathe out, let your shoulders relax and drop down, let your chest relax, let your body relax."*
- *"Imagine that you're a chocolate bar and somebody left you on a hot sidewalk on a sunny day. Every time you breathe in, feel the warmth, and when you breathe out, let a little of that stress melt and float away."*
- *"Just do some self-talk while you breathe and tell yourself let go… let go…"*
- Lead them through relaxing their whole bodies while keeping their eyes closed or averted. Start with having them focus on their feet – tighten all the muscles in their feet and then relax when they exhale. Then tighten all the muscles in their calf area on the in-breath and relax when they exhale. All the way up the body, one small area at a time, including the shoulders, the jaw, the face.

Ask students what they notice. *"What helped the most or what could help?"*

This template works for helping students identify emotions by having the class help you make a list on the board of all the kinds of feelings kids have and then inviting students to draw where they hold each of those feelings.

Younger kids can draw their superpowers inside of them. Be creative and come up with your own ideas on using this!

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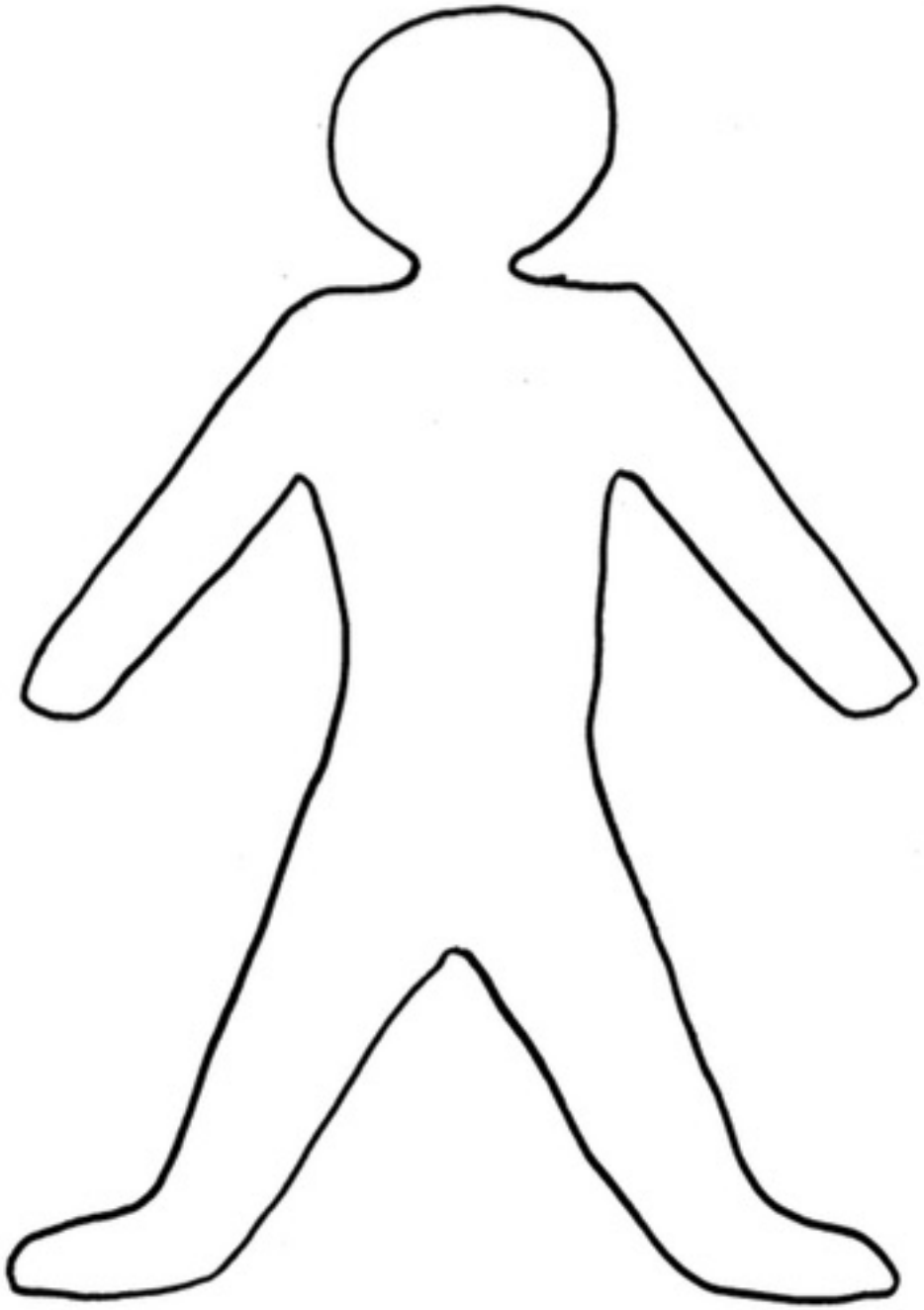

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Circles of Trust – Instructions

Template on next page

Goal: This activity can be adapted for a range of uses. The instructions are simply to ask students to write names or information in each ring as instructed. For younger children you could suggest they draw little images or picture reminders of the suggestion.

Some examples are:

- Using it as a socio-gram, revealing each child's support system. Instruct students to write the names of:
  - People they most trust in the center circle
  - People they trust in general for things perhaps not quite so personal
  - People they love to spend time with for fun but might not tell secrets

  - *Ending questions:*
    - *What do you notice about the names you have on your page?*
    - *What do each of these people do that makes them important?*
    - *How are they similar? How are they different?*
    - *How have they helped you get through difficult times?*

- Have the focus on three levels of resilience
  - *"Sometimes we face really big challenges and big fears. I bet you can think of one that happened for you. Although it was difficult, you made it through that time. Let's look at what we've learned."*
  - Inner circle – what did someone do that helped you get through that time
  - Middle circle – who helped your family get through that time
  - Third circle – who came to help our town recover

  - *Ending questions:*
    - *What have you learned that would help others to know?*
    - *We'll all have time when we're anxious. What do you remember about how you managed anxiety?*

- Reinforcing a sense of safety
  - *"There are lots of little things we can do to help ourselves feel safe in the world. Let's look at what they are:*
  - Inner circle – what can kids do to help themselves feel safe?
  - Middle circle – what can parents and adults do to help kids feel safe?
  - Outer circle – what can schools do to help kids feel safe?

  - *Ending questions:*
    - *What makes kids feel unsafe?*
    - *What kinds of strengths (or superpowers) can help kids calm down?*
    - *Often it helps for us to tell people who are important to us what we need from them. Who are the adults you think you might need to talk to about this?*

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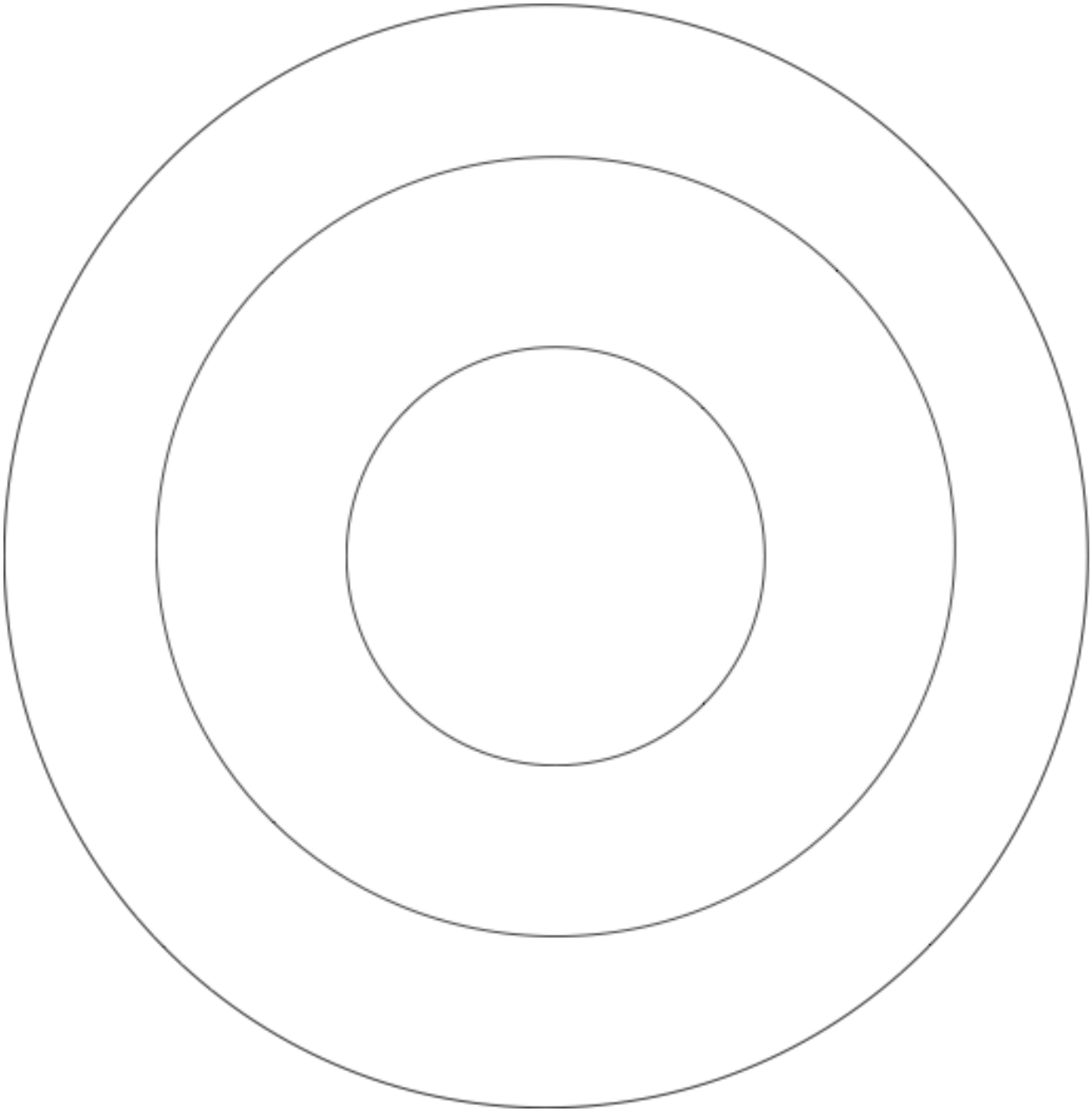
Circles of Trust and Resilience



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