

After a Death Impacts the School Community

A Tip Sheet for School Staff Members

When a death occurs in a school community, it can be a daunting task for the adults there to know what to do and how to react. Whether it is the death of a student, faculty member, or parent, a death can greatly impact the greater school community both in and out of the classroom. It is vital for all those working in the school who come in contact with students to be aware of how to best support grieving students and staff as well as how to take care of their own needs and emotions.

Grief is a normal part of life; no matter how difficult it may be to understand. While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are some helpful things to keep in mind when you are struggling to support a student or staff member.

The following pages include a helpful table with tips to provide support to yourself, your colleagues, and your students.



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Check In

Identify your own feelings and reactions to the death, which may be affected by other deaths you have experienced, your relationship to the person who died and how the person died. The circumstances and unanswered questions around the death can also impact your response.

Just like you have varying reactions, your colleagues may have many different responses to the death and the information provided. Some might find it helpful to communicate their feelings and thoughts soon after the death while others need time to process on their own. Be patient with each other especially when your reactions are different from those around you.

Age, personality, maturity, relationship to the person who died, and other losses in life impact students' reactions to the news of a death. Allow students to express their feelings about the death in a way that feels most comfortable whether it's writing, drawing, talking, or other outlets. Be sensitive if there are students who do not want to express their feelings about the death.



Identify Supports

Having a support system both in and out of school is important in creating a supportive and healthy environment for yourself. Even though your role includes helping and supporting students every day, this may be a time when you need to ask for support from others. A supervisor may be able to refer you to additional individual and group supports.

Everyone can be a helper in their own position and role in making the school a safe and functioning environment for all. Check in with each other and be a support for others to the extent you are able and remember that support may look different to everyone.

Students may seek support from peers, school personnel, and people outside of school. It is important to recognize that all students do not require the same type of support. Being open, available, and genuine with students as they seek support will assist them in processing their thoughts and feelings about the death. A student may or may not want to talk with you about the death, but if they feel they are in a supportive environment and not alone, they will have a better chance to grieve in a healthy way.

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Remember Grief Reactions are Unique

Reactions to a death are distinct to the individual and should not be judged. It is normal for you to experience a myriad of emotions right after a death and beyond, including anger, sadness, disbelief, confusion, guilt, and relief. You may have physical reactions as well including trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and loss of appetite. It is important to be aware of these reactions and feelings and to implement healthy coping skills at this time. Some may choose talking to others, writing, art, or a physical activity to cope. Seek additional support if you feel you are struggling to manage your reactions in a healthy way.

Your colleagues are also experiencing their own array of personal reactions to the death. If you are able, talk with each other about how you are feeling and coping and the difficulties you may be having.

You may notice students' reactions in school in a variety of ways. It is important to recognize behaviors that may occur as a grief reaction and to try to understand what the student really needs during that time. Frequent trips to the nurse, daydreaming in class, a sudden drop in grades, social isolation, or acting out could all be a student's way of responding to the death. Even if students did not have direct contact or a close relationship with the deceased, they still may have a response based on the school environment, their past experience with death, and other unknown factors. The school counselor or social worker can assist in these situations to help get the student the proper support so that they can succeed in school. Remember, there is no timeline for grief so these reactions can occur any time after the death.

Establish Routine and Make a Space for Grief

Getting back to your normal routine after a death can be both helpful and difficult. Some people want to return to their daily activities right away and others may find it very hard to do so. Getting back to your routine in your own time is important to establish a new normal and to continue to live life. Allow yourself a space to grieve as you return to your routine.

Just like you may have trouble getting back to your routine, each person in the school community may be struggling too. Talking about any difficulties in re-establishing routine and supporting each other in creating a new normal together can make this part of the process easier.

Returning to the routine of school, while allowing accommodations as indicated, is especially important for your students. Accommodations are generally necessary after a death in the school community to acknowledge what has occurred and to provide a supportive environment for students to grieve. Although it may be difficult for them at times to focus on school when they are grieving, the routine is the familiar piece in an uncertain time. Understanding that students also need a space to grieve and allowing that space within the routine of the school day will be helpful to both the student as well as the greater school community.

Additional Resources for School Staff

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

www.grievingstudents.org

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children

www.childrengrieve.org

What's Your Grief?

www.whatsyourgrief.com

The Dougy Center

www.dougy.org

New York Life Foundation

www.newyorklife.com/achildgrief

Just like the journey through life, your family, friends, culture, religion, and other life experiences shape your grief experience. Coming together as a school community after a death can be a source of comfort and support.



The Center for Grieving Children

The Center for Grieving Children helps children grieving a death heal and grow through their grief, while strengthening families, communities, and professionals' understanding of how best to respond to their needs.

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