



Almost Everything You Wanted to Know about Grief

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN STUDENTS in our classrooms who have experienced the death of someone important in their lives. Whether their number has remained the same or increased in recent years, as some experts contend, makes little difference when one of these students is sitting at a desk in your room. Sometimes the death that affects that student touches you as well, and you may be challenged to find ways to deal with your own grief. Regardless of the circumstances, however, you may find yourself echoing the questions that are on the minds of many educators:

- What is my role in helping students cope with loss?
- If I'm affected by the death, too, how do I keep my reactions from interfering with my interactions with my students?
- Is it better to ignore the death and go on with "life as usual"?
- What do I say to students when they ask me about the death of another student?
- How do I reintegrate a student who has been absent after a death? How do I prepare my class?
- How do I deal with topics in the curriculum that might remind students about a death or tragedy?
- What special techniques are necessary to deal with an event like September 11th? Can I anticipate the reactions of my students?

This booklet will give you information to help you formulate your own answers to these common questions. It will ask questions to help you make the content relevant to your own experience and needs, outline additional resources, and increase your comfort level in managing grief in the school setting.

How am I supposed to react to a student who has experienced a death?

Recognizing that you have a reaction and are entitled to your reaction is the best place to start. Take time to identify and experience your own feelings before you even think of trying to help your students deal with theirs. Your response to the current event is affected by the ways in which you have handled previous losses in your life.

Over the course of our lives, each of us creates what can be called a *grief closet*. This is the place within our psyche where all the things in life that have created feelings of grief are stored. The contents of this closet include our grief reactions to deaths as well as to the myriad smaller losses we face each day. These include losses related to friendships, life events such as moving or divorce, or more intangible losses related to opportunities, dreams, and aspirations.

Like the catch-all closet that you can find in many homes, the “grief closet” is the place where we store our reactions to these losses. These reactions don’t disappear; they get jumbled haphazardly in the closet until they tumble out one day when we open the closet door to stuff in another loss.

Before trying to sort out your feelings related to this loss, take a quick inventory of your “grief closet.” An inventory is helpful because understanding the connections between our reactions to losses, even those of dissimilar circumstances, can help us in understanding and managing our reactions to a current loss.

Here are questions that may give you some help in cleaning out your “closet”:

1. What is the first death that you remember? How did you respond? How did those around you respond?
2. What’s the most significant death you’ve experienced? How long ago did it happen? When you think of it now, are your feelings still stirred? What are these feelings?
3. What was your most recent loss? Is it difficult to think about? Have you gotten any help for dealing with your feelings?
4. Have you experienced a loss similar to the loss your school is currently facing? Do you still have feelings about it? What are they?

If you find that your answers to any of these questions are unsettling, talk about them with someone you trust. This might be a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a counselor. It’s important that you talk to someone who will listen to what you have to say without trying to change or “fix” your feelings. Talking about feelings is a proven strategy for decreasing their intensity and can often provide perspective or clarity.

Spend a few minutes trying to digest and understand the information you have received about this current death. Find out the answers to the following questions:

- Is the deceased a student or another member of the school community (like a faculty member)?
- How well was the deceased integrated into the school community? (There is often a greater reaction to the death of someone who is seen as an integral part of the school setting than someone who had a minor role in the setting.)
- Was the death sudden, or was it something that was expected? Were the circumstances surrounding the death violent?
- If the death occurred as the result of an automobile accident, were other students, either from your school or neighboring schools, injured or killed?

- Did other students in the school or community witness the death?
- Was it the death of a parent? Was the parent active in the school? How long are the bereaved children expected to be absent from school?
- Will the event receive media coverage?

The answers to these questions as well as any others that seem relevant as you gather information about the death can help you anticipate the degree of complexity of your own reactions as well as those within the school community.

Unless the death was anticipated, the initial response to a death is often to ask “why?” Even though this question has no answer, most will continue to ask it until some degree of acceptance has been reached. In the initial hours of the circumstances surrounding the death, it is important to remind everyone, especially yourself, that the question of “why” will probably never be answered to everyone’s satisfaction. In order to successfully move forward in the grieving process, everyone must deal with the simple fact that someone has died, regardless of the reason.

If you are very upset about the death, examine your relationship to the deceased. Perhaps you are responding to the death in a personal way. You may also find yourself extremely affected if the death even touches your life in a tangential way (for example, the deceased is your age or the age of your children). If your reaction to the death surprises you, remember that feelings of other losses in your life may be triggered by this loss. Take another look at the inventory inside your grief closet. If you still feel overwhelmed, seek out a member of your school’s crisis team or guidance staff for support. If you’re uncomfortable with this type of self-disclosure in your work setting, seek out community resources, like clergy or mental health professionals.

Awareness of your own personal reactions to a death is essential in helping you separate your response from the reactions of your students. This awareness can also help you create an atmosphere where any student’s reaction to the death is acceptable. Once you have taken time to understand your own responses, you will be able to do a better job in helping your students cope with theirs.

Steps For Dealing with Personal Reactions

- Take an inventory of your grief closet
- Talk with someone about the contents
- Gather information about the current situation
- Remain aware of your personal reaction

What do I say to students when they ask me about another student's death?

Answering questions regarding another student's death must be guided by your school's policies and procedures. These are usually informed by the

- age and grade level of the students
- "need to know"
- circumstances of the death
- wishes of the family of the deceased

These interrelated factors will provide the framework for determining *what to say* as well as *what not to say*.

Any information about death needs to be provided in developmentally sensitive ways. Because the initial understanding children have of death is cognitive, they will process concrete information about death before they experience feelings about it.

Here's an abbreviated explanation of the ages and stages on how children conceptualize and understand death:

- **Ages three to five:** Children's understanding is that death is temporary. While they recognize that life is changed for the deceased, they expect that the deceased will return sometime in the future.
- **Ages five to nine:** Children arrive at an understanding that death is permanent, but they do not yet understand that it is universal. Death becomes personified and there is a magical belief that if one is smart or strong enough, death can be outwitted.
- **Ages nine to adolescence:** As children age, they begin to understand intellectually that death is both permanent and universal. Feelings about death start to surface around this age, but an emotional understanding and acceptance about the reality of death is still years away.
- **Adolescence:** This age group is often the most challenged by the reality of death and may valiantly try to deny it. In truth, in order to accomplish the developmental tasks of figuring out who they are and what is important to them, which are a critical focus during the teenage years, there is some need to keep even the idea of death far from conscious thought.

For most elementary school students, the fact that someone has died is enough initial information for them to process. It is imperative to use the words *death* or

died rather than euphemistic expressions like “passed away” or “the child was lost” or “God took her to heaven.” Children at this age are very literal thinkers and these expressions can confuse them.

The primary need of young children when they learn about a death is usually for reassurance that something similar won’t happen to them. They can benefit from your assurance that the death of a child is an irregularity and that most people live long lives. If the death was accidental, it is important to note that although accidents happen, there are always ways to enhance personal safety. The teacher might say, for example, *“We’ve heard a lot about the car accident in which Casey died. Let’s talk about the things we all can do to help us feel safer when we ride in cars.”*

A brief discussion about the differences in the ways people feel and behave when they are grieving can be helpful. It is also helpful to initiate discussion on ways to handle those feelings. Strategies to suggest include talking with someone, writing or drawing about feelings, and saying prayers. Pay special attention to children whose response seems disproportionate to the situation. Their grief closet may have opened and they could need additional support outside of the classroom.

Middle school students are intellectually capable of processing more information. However, the need of these students to know details is still very limited. Expect these students to gossip about the circumstances of the death, with rumors and misinformation reaching dramatic proportions. Responding with a simple “I haven’t heard that . . .” or “I’ve heard that rumor, too, but it isn’t true” are effective ways to avoid perpetuating the stories that are created to fill the gaps in information.

It is also important to shift the focus from the circumstances of the death, with which students in this age group are often preoccupied, to the fact that the student has died. The teacher might say, for example, *“Even though we are concerned about the way Julia died, it’s important to think about all the ways we’re going to miss her in our classroom.”*

High school students may have more information about the death than you do, considering the way information, especially about tragic deaths, moves through cyberspace. Don’t get tricked into sharing more than your school administrator’s official statement. A simple “all I know is” can be an effective way to address students’ requests for your corroboration of their fund of information.

The information that the parents of the deceased want disseminated may also guide what you share with students. Sometimes parents request that the family’s privacy be respected and school and student involvement be kept to a minimum in funeral or memorial services. The family’s wishes must be respected. In other circumstances, the family may not want to elaborate on the cause of death. To the best of your ability, your school needs to see that this request is honored as well.

The best thing you can do for your students is to listen, recognize their feelings, and know your in-school resources for any student who needs additional support.

Whatever you do say, it is important that you keep your response simple. Recognizing students' feelings, reassuring them that they are normal, and referring those students who appear to need more than simple classroom support are the essential ingredients in an effective response.

Another important thing to remember is to be truthful, regardless of student age. Don't give false assurances. It does not provide any sense of peace to students when you say things like "I'm sure he didn't suffer" or "Something like this could never happen to you." Do not diminish the students' reactions to the event or overreactions to the death. The best thing you can do for your students at this time is to listen, recognize their feelings, and know your in-school resources for any student who needs additional support.

While no situation is ever easy, some deaths are more complicated than others. One of those circumstances is when the death occurs during the course of the school day or on or near school property. Often, simply acknowledging that a student death has occurred and that very little information is available about it at the present time can be very helpful to students. This will allow students to process the initial information about the death before they deal with the circumstances surrounding it. It is often easier to accept difficult information when it is presented in small doses. Encourage students to talk with their parents about what's happened, and caution them about the emergence of rumors. If your school has a Web site, this could be an excellent way to communicate a brief statement about the death and the resources available to help children and their families deal with their reactions to it.

Information about violent deaths is also hard to digest, even for adults. Understanding that these situations are especially challenging can help you anticipate the complicated reactions that can surface long after the death has occurred. These reactions are often triggered by a reminder that stirs up memories of the deceased.

When the circumstances of the death are public—like a car accident, homicide, or suicide—you are often confronted with information disseminated by the media. It is impossible to ignore what students are exposed to outside of school. Therefore, it might be helpful to consider a model for responding.

The Four Rs of Response

- Recognize
- Reassure
- Reinforce
- Refer

- **FIRST: Recognize**—acknowledge the coverage.

“I know there have been a lot of articles in the newspapers about Lisa’s death. They’ve been hard for me to read. Have any of you felt that way, too?”

- **SECOND: Reassure**—correct blatant misinformation. Create an opportunity for class discussion about the accuracy as well as the inaccuracy of news sources and the importance of discrimination when interpreting media coverage.

“I know the article said this, but as you know, that’s not exactly true.”

- **THIRD: Reinforce**—use the class’s reactions to the coverage to reinforce how easily feelings and thoughts about the event can be provoked. Problem-solve coping techniques for handling these types of reminders.

- **FOURTH: Refer**—remind the students about available support and resources.

Anticipating reactions can give you a “heads up” in responding to them.

What do I say to students when they ask me about the death of another student’s parent?

Under most circumstances, the death of a parent is not something that commands the attention of the entire school community. A brief announcement may be made in the classes attended by the bereaved: *“I’m sorry to inform you that John Clark’s father died last night. I know those of you who are close to John may want to reach out to him to offer your support.”*

In elementary and middle schools, if the deceased was actively involved in the classroom, the loss will obviously be more personal and immediate. It’s important to take some time to address student reactions. Spending class time to write

and/or draw expressions of sympathy and remembrance can be very healing. With younger students, explain that sharing memories of the person who died often makes the bereaved family feel a little better because they are receiving the gift of your memories of the deceased.

When a school community experiences a wave of parental deaths, the people most affected are often the faculty. The feelings of unfairness generated when young children lose a parent to death are exponentially increased by multiple losses. Faculty members who are themselves close in age to the parents of their students may find that these deaths hit too close to home. It's often useful for resource staff to offer optional meetings where faculty can discuss their reactions to the losses.

Strategies for Reintegrating a Student Who Has Been Absent after a Death

It's important to balance the uniqueness of each child and the individuality of grief reactions with the basic foundation of respecting the privacy of the bereaved. Most children do not want their classmates to have much information about their loss. Bereaved students of all ages are often embarrassed by expressions of sympathy, whether from peers or faculty members. This could be interpreted by the bereaved student as people "feeling sorry" for them. Especially as students approach middle school, children often feel that they have the right to share as much—or as little—information as they want with both peers and teachers. Many students who have experienced a death report feeling "different" from their classmates at a time when fitting into their peer group is extremely important.

As an educator, you can both acknowledge the death and respect the privacy of the bereaved student. When the school first learns about the death, many teachers invite their students to write individual sympathy notes, especially if the bereaved student will be absent for an extended period of time. Having the entire class sign a sympathy card that is mailed to the home of the bereaved is a simple way to express the condolences of the class. Communicating personal expressions of grief in writing is often easier than verbalizing them. This can also reduce the anxiety that surrounds not knowing what to say. Asking students how they would like to be treated in a similar situation can sometimes facilitate sensitive and empathic responses to the bereaved.

When the student does return to school, often the routine, predictability, and support available in the school can provide a sense of comfort to the student. It is acceptable to ask the bereaved student how you can help him or her: *"Is there any way I can help you over the next few days?"*

In general, students who have suffered a loss due to death are absent for several days and require special reintegration back into the classroom setting:

- Treat the student's return to the classroom as you would any absences related to other causes, such as illnesses. The consistency in responses will not garner unwanted special attention.
- If you have not already done so, privately and simply acknowledge the death.
"I'm sorry about your mom's death."
- Validate the student's return to school. You can suggest this same response to students who are unsure about what to say to the returning student.
"I'm glad to see you back in school. We've missed you."
- Discuss missed class work and assignments and make arrangements for completion. If necessary, adjust immediate expectations.
"I know this has been an extremely difficult time for you. If you are having trouble concentrating on schoolwork, let's talk about a short-term strategy to take off some of the pressure. What do you think about a take-home assignment instead of having to turn in all your missed work?"
- Monitor the student's academic performance and social interactions from a discreet distance. If you observe behavior that concerns you, check it out.
- Encourage the student to use appropriate school resources for additional support.

The longer-term issues of reintegration require gentle and persistent attention to the academic performance and social behavior of the bereaved child. Some decline in performance might be expected in the aftermath of the death. Therefore, it is

Guidelines for Reintegration

- Welcome the returning student privately
- Coach other classmates if necessary
- Treat the return to school like other excused absences
- Discuss missed assignments and make appropriate accommodations
- Observe and monitor
- Encourage use of additional school resources

important to make realistic accommodations to compensate for the difficulty the bereaved child may have in concentrating, studying, or completing assignments on time. However, these accommodations should only be used on a short-term basis. Students who have had their academic standards excused for longer periods of time sometimes report thinking teachers “feel sorry” for them by not requiring them to work competitively with the rest of their class.

Students who continue to have difficulty four to six weeks after the event might be experiencing other mental or emotional health issues related to the death. These students should be referred to the appropriate sources for assessment. In situations like this, your classroom expectations can be guided by the professional who makes the assessment. It is critical that you be an active part of the team working to meet the needs of the grieving student with discretion and appropriate support.

Isn't it better to ignore a death and go on with “life as usual”?

“Life as usual” is changed anytime a death occurs. Ignoring it doesn't alter the fact that a death has happened. It may send students the message that it's better not to acknowledge or talk about unfortunate life events. It is naïve to think that students will not be talking about what's occurred among themselves if they aren't given an opportunity to do so within the structure of the classroom.

Over the course of time, every school community is likely to experience the death of one of its members. That's why planning proactively about how to address a death provides you with a degree of control if and when a death happens. It's absolutely possible to facilitate the expressions of grief in a structured, organized way that maintains the predictability of school routine at a time when something unpredictable and upsetting has happened.

This acknowledgment of death is, however, limited, and should be confined by the school's policies and procedures. To acknowledge a death and assist grieving students can be accomplished within the framework of the school's continuing responsibility to its living student body. While the flow of the school may be altered for several days, especially if the death had an acute impact, life in the school should return to normal as soon as possible.

Students can be encouraged to record their memories of the deceased privately in letters or memory books that can be given to the family as longer-lasting tributes. These examples are more active forms of grieving than passive displays like flowers or mementos, which are simply placed at a symbolic site. Active grief engages our emotions in the process of remembering the role the deceased played in our lives more effectively.

Key Questions:

1. Have I been in a school setting where a death was ignored? Did the students still talk about it?
2. Have I been in a setting where the life of the school seemed to stop because of a death? What was that like?
3. If I wanted to get some help in learning how to talk with students about a death, is there another faculty member with whom I could connect?
4. Am I in a position to mentor a less-experienced faculty member on this topic?

Is the school an appropriate place to conduct a bereavement support group for students who have experienced the death of a family member?

Because many children dislike feeling different from their peers, providing a support group for bereaved students can help diminish the isolation that often accompanies the death of someone important in their lives. Meeting with other students who have experienced similar types of losses gives the bereaved an opportunity to connect with peers and talk about their reactions to the disorganizing experience of death. This is one of the reasons it is helpful to limit group membership to only those students who have experienced a death rather than including students whose family structure has changed because of divorce. Many bereaved students report that more-inclusive membership dilutes the group's effectiveness by reinforcing the fact that, unlike divorce, the change that took place in their families is final and irrevocable.

Listening to the experiences of others can help to put one's own experiences into perspective. It's also helpful to have conversation about the life changes that have taken place and how family life is different—and the same—since the death. Providing education about the wide and individualized range of reactions to grief can facilitate a sense of normalcy about the process. To feel like "I'm not the only one this happened to" can go a long way in helping students feel at home again in the school community as they find new and unexpected sources of support.

There are a few cautions in running these types of groups:

- The foundation of these groups must include an understanding that they will be focused on providing support and not on clinical intervention. Even if a licensed mental health professional is available to serve as the group leader, the appropriate functions of these types of groups in the school setting are to provide support and to enhance coping skills. Students who require more intense clinical interventions should be referred elsewhere.

- While free-flowing group discussion is a channel for providing both support and perspective, it can be enhanced through structured questions and activities. Organize meetings around specific content rather than letting group content be directed by the members. This approach often helps grief reactions seem less confusing through its presentation of organized topics for discussion. It can also engender feelings of safety in participants as it makes clear that the leader is in control of what goes on in the group.
- Remember that not every student who has experienced a death will be a candidate for group membership. If you are a classroom teacher, forward the names of eligible students to the appropriate resource person for membership consideration. If you are the group leader, think about how a potential student will fit in with other members.
- Because of the nature of the loss, these school-based groups work better for students who have experienced parental death than they do for students who have lost a peer or sibling. The impact and aftermath of parental death are profound and life changing and require continuing exploration as children age. While the initial impact of a peer's death can certainly be devastating, its effects are generally not life changing. Most students do not require group support after the death of a classmate, and those who do can be referred to outside resources for this type of service.

How can I prepare for topics in the curriculum that might upset grieving students?

Teaching can be challenging enough without having to be concerned about whether or not a particular piece of curriculum will be upsetting to a given student. Unfortunately, some students are vulnerable to material that stirs memories and feelings about traumatic life events like the death of someone important in their lives or disasters.

In addition to specific curriculum content, also pay attention to your language when you cover this material. While slang expressions are acceptable in personal conversation, they have the potential to be offensive to vulnerable students, especially those who are grieving. A variety of graphic descriptions are used for violent deaths like homicide and suicide (“he blew his brains out,” “she was wiped out,” “he got knocked off,” etc.). Equally offensive are descriptive idioms for mental illness (“she was nuts,” “he’s wacko,” etc.). Simply based on the statistics of occurrence, there is a good chance that there will be students in each of your classes who have personal experience with one or another of life’s calamities. Your sensitivity to the way in which these topics are discussed can go a long way in decreasing the stigma that often surrounds them.

Key Points to Remember in Relating to Students Who Are Grieving

- Review my school's policies and procedures for dealing with death
- Identify my resource staff
- Periodically take inventory of my "grief closet" so I know what's in it
- Don't ignore a death; talking about it will provide support and control for both me and my students
- Address my own reactions first
- Remember that children react to death differently than adults; I can't use my own responses as a guideline to theirs
- Acknowledge bereaved students, but don't give them special attention in front of their classmates; respect their needs for privacy
- Adjust their class work for a short period of time if appropriate
- Consider death as a process, not simply an event, so expect continuing reactions over time
- Discreetly monitor the performance and behavior of bereaved students for changes
- Refer them to resource staff if they need additional support before they get into academic trouble
- Stick to my school's official statement about a death
- Keep what I say to students simple
- Don't validate gossip or rumors about a death
- Remind students that the circumstances of a death are less significant over time than the fact that the death has happened
- Check out my community bereavement resources
- Stay calm if I get initial notification of a death when I'm in the classroom
- Limit my media intake about a disaster if it troubles me and advise my students to do the same
- Review my class roster for students with recent loss histories
- Be sensitive for curriculum reminders
- Watch my language when I talk about death or trauma in classroom discussions
- If I'm not a mental health counselor, I'm not expected to be one; my only expectation is to be a source of support to my students

Potential Curriculum Topics That Might Create Upsetting Reminders of a Traumatic Event

- Language Arts: stories about death, suicide, homicide
- History: review of traumatic historical events, upsetting current events
- Driver's Education: discussions about driver safety, car accidents, drinking and driving
- Health Education: topics like death, suicide, alcoholism
- Science: natural disasters like floods, forest fires, earthquakes

It helps if you can identify the students who might be upset by a particular topic prior to the lesson. If they indicate that they would be uncomfortable remaining in class, give them an alternative assignment to work on in another location, such as the library, computer lab, or study hall.

The students you don't know about are more difficult. Here are suggestions for managing them:

- When you are reviewing your class roster, don't forget to include students who have been affected by some type of loss within the last several years. Their losses can be reactivated even after time has elapsed.
- Review your curriculum materials for topics that might be sensitive to any type of loss or trauma so that you can effectively prepare for potentially challenging areas.
- Consider the use of some type of general disclaimer at the beginning of the school year, such as *"Sometimes, things we talk about in the classroom can be upsetting. If we are covering a topic that is personally upsetting or distressing to you, please let me know privately, and I will see how we can handle it."*
- Ask a member of your school's crisis response team for suggestions for responding to a student who might get upset in the classroom.

Key Questions:

1. What are the specific topics in the curriculum I teach that could be potentially upsetting to these vulnerable kids?
2. Who are the students on my current class roster who might have a personal reaction to one of these topics?

3. How can I prepare to address these lessons with them?
4. What should I do when there's an unanticipated student reaction? Do I refer the student to the guidance staff? What do I say to the student? What do I say to the rest of the class?
5. Are there some topics in the curriculum that might serve as trauma/loss reminders for me? What can I do to address them?

I've seen students who have no reaction at all after a death or what I consider to be an inappropriate one, like making jokes. Does this indicate a big problem?

It is important to be careful in applying adult understanding of appropriate grief reactions to children. The way children react to most things in life is based on their maturity and developmental abilities; consequently, what we observe about grief in children can look very different from what we observe in adults.

- Children generally approach death with emotional caution, which is similar to how they approach all life events they find emotionally challenging. Because their immature ego structures do not have the capacity to tolerate intense emotions for extended periods of time, they experience feelings briefly, and then back away from them. When viewed from an adult perspective, children may appear to be denying what has happened. In all likelihood, they are trying to deal with the reality of the loss in small, more manageable doses. When they are ready, they will approach the death more directly again.
- Children work through painful feelings differently than adults. Children's play can serve many functions, one of which is to help them deal with and resolve painful feelings. Physical play or creative projects, such as arts and crafts, provide children with the outlets they need for emotional expression as well as keep them connected to their peers, from whom they receive support and validation.
- Frequent illness and somatic complaints are common reactions of grieving children, and visits to the school nurse may become regular occurrences. It can be helpful to point out to children how we sometimes use our bodies to express feelings that are difficult to put into words.
- There really aren't any initial reactions to learning about a death that are considered inappropriate. All reactions are emotionally functional. Silliness and joking are well-known cover-ups for anxiety and worry. Anger can often reflect our disappointment that the deceased didn't take better care of himself or herself or the fact that this valued person is no longer an active part of our lives. A simple comment like "I want to

understand a little more about why you feel this way” can sometimes cut through the cover-up feeling and get to what is really going on with the student at a deeper level.

- The meaning of a loss—especially the death of a parent or caretaker—will change as children grow and mature. At each developmental stage and passage, the reality of how that loss affects their lives will need to be re-evaluated and often re-grieved.

What is my role in dealing with grieving students?

One of the functions of a school is to teach students life skills. Students learn how to read maps so they don't get lost, to count money to buy necessary goods and services, to read and write to facilitate communication. All of these activities can be considered life skills.

Death is an intrinsic part of life, and “life as usual” includes death. Dealing with death fits the context of other life skills. Below are guidelines for dealing with grieving students:

- Follow your school's policies and procedures.
 - For student/faculty deaths, these policies should provide you with a framework for integrating your role and responsibilities into the overall school response plan. Many schools provide faculty with a written announcement of the death for reading to students and an outline of where and how to refer students who may need additional support. In many instances, a member of the school's crisis team will follow the class schedule of the deceased to address student questions and concerns. Emergency faculty meetings may be scheduled for updates and briefings.
 - In other situations, like the death of a parent, your role and responsibilities may be less clear. Usually, in-class announcements about parental deaths are limited to the classroom of the bereaved student, especially in grade school or middle school. In high school, an announcement may be made in a homeroom. Information can be simple and limited:

“I have some sad news. Alisha's mother died over the weekend. I know you will join me in sending her kind thoughts.”

- Whatever the circumstances of the death, it is very helpful for you to pay attention to your students' reactions. While you expect students who had a relationship with the deceased to be affected by the news, remember that this event might open the “grief closet” of other students. Watch for changes in behavior and performance and alert your resource staff to students whose behavior has changed since the event. If your school

does not have resource staff, talk to the parents/guardians of the students about whom you are concerned.

- Continue to pay attention throughout the school year to those students who were especially affected by the death. A decline in school performance, even months after the death, might signal delayed grief symptoms. Share your concerns with resource staff or parents and encourage their intervention.

If your school does not have policies and procedures relating to responding to deaths, talk with your school administrator about their utility. In the meantime, you can apply the guidelines suggested here in a less formal sense. In the absence of school resources, you will need to rely more heavily on community resources for support. Be sure to investigate what's available to you before you're in a crisis.

Key Questions

1. Have I reviewed my school's policies and procedures about dealing with deaths?
2. Do I know who the appropriate resource staff are within my school?
3. What kind of feedback can I expect if I refer a student to these resources?
4. Do students know who these resource staff are?

Addressing my students' reactions to September 11th was a nightmare for me. I didn't have a clue! Is there any information available that might have helped me?

Just as it did with death, an understanding of the ways in which children conceptualize traumatic events is the essential first step that guides your interventions. Here are key points to keep in mind:

- Children view traumatic events differently than adults. Unless they are personally touched by the event, they might not even react at all. Traumatic events that take place in different states or communities may seem worlds apart. Even events in their hometown may feel distant unless someone the children know is personally involved.
- The way children view the passage of time helps them recover from traumas more quickly than adults. Because children tend to focus on the immediate present rather than on the past or future, they are able to put all events, even traumatic ones, behind them in what can seem like a short period of time. This fact can change if the child is personally

affected. In that situation, reminders of the trauma are ever-present and keep the event a part of the child's current reality.

- A child's immature ego structures can only tolerate intense feelings for a short period of time. For this reason, young children appear to underreact to trauma and death. Children may experience an emotion deeply, and then unconsciously back away from the feeling until they are prepared to deal with the intensity of the emotion. What may look like avoidance and denial to adults is actually a very effective coping strategy. Savvy adults will take advantage of the opportunities to talk about the trauma when children present them.
- The way in which young children respond to a traumatic event can often be predicted by the reactions of the adults to whom the children are close. For example, children will be more alarmed if the adults in their lives seem upset and emotional, and less affected if the adults react in calm, reassuring ways.
- For both adults and children, recovery from trauma means putting the experience behind and getting back to normal life. "Normal life" for children consists of going to school, playing, and other everyday activities. Anything adults can do to create this safe and predictable environment will help. This is another example of how the structure and predictability of the school setting can create an island of stability for children during a crisis. The consistency of the rules and expectations of the school setting provides a sense of control and order, particularly when events in the environment seem out of control.

Special Techniques for Dealing with a Large-scale Disaster

- Consider your own reactions first. This is most likely easier if the event occurs when school is not in session and you have time to process your reactions before you interact with your students. Identify your own responses and share them with someone you trust. Talking about feelings can provide validation, de-escalate their intensity, and begin the process of managing them.
- If you learn about the event when you are in the classroom, focus on your responsibility to keep yourself and your students calm. Follow your school's guidelines for conveying information to the class. Remind your students that initial information, even when it is from a reputable news source, may be inaccurate or misleading. When the school day is over, it is imperative that you make time to consciously think about what's happened and identify and address your own reactions.

- Once you've accepted the reality of the event, it is critical to reestablish a sense of control over your own life and surroundings. Traumatic events can create an atmosphere of confusion and danger; the conscious recognition of this fact is the first step in dealing with it. It can be reassuring to review plans for your own personal and family safety. This type of review may also be helpful for your students. Although people can't control the world around them, they can control their responses.
- Limit your intake of news about the disaster if you find media reports upsetting. If you feel more control when you are aware of each emerging detail, pursue information about the event. Keep in mind that each of us, children included, has our own unique style of crisis management and containment. Younger students are generally not comforted by lots of details, which can be confusing and overwhelming. High school students may need information to feel like they are coping with what is happening around them. Your role is not to share what you know with students. Rather, it is to acknowledge differing needs for information and to urge caution in accepting the veracity of news reports and rumors.
- Focus on recovery efforts. In every disaster, there are examples of courage and heroism in the way that people directly affected by the disaster respond. Seek out these stories and use them in classroom discussions. These stories provide balance to the tragedy and are often good examples of the resiliency of the human spirit. Encourage students to personally consider ways to help those affected by the event. Active involvement in remediation counteracts the helplessness that is common to either natural or provoked disasters.
- Know where to go for help, both for yourself and for your students. In-school resources are often the best referral source for students. These resources may also be available for the faculty. Community agencies may offer disaster-related support services and are usually staffed with professionals who have had training in disaster response and recovery.
- Remember that disasters are not simply "events" with discrete beginnings and ends, but rather "processes" that continue and evolve over time. Be aware of students who seem to be more affected by the disaster and monitor their performance and behavior for signs of change. Be alert to those occasions when the intensity of disaster-related emotions might escalate. These include the anniversary of the event, news stories that call attention to the event, or the occurrence of similar events. Remind yourself, and your students, that the re-emergence of strong feelings does not mean that healing or adjustment hasn't taken place. It's simply a reflection of the intensity of the event and how profoundly everyone was initially affected. Advise them that these

intense feelings often diminish within a short period of time. If these feelings do persist, remind students of the in-school resources.

- Build a catalog of professional resources for yourself. Explore Web sites for information that relates to the ways in which children react to disasters as well as strategies for discussing these types of events in the classroom. Investigate resiliency-based curriculum that can be incorporated into your normal teaching practice.

Online Resources

An ever-expanding number of resources on the Web deal with grief, loss, and trauma in childhood. Below are just a few.

www.allkidsgrieve.org includes a short annotated bibliography as well as a section on “Overcoming resistance to loss and death curriculum in the schools”

www.beyondindigo.com offers broad content, especially articles about grief from well-respected journals

www.batesville.com publishes “The Helping Series,” a set of brochures that offer specific assistance for various types of death; contact your local funeral director to obtain copies of these brochures

www.centeringcorp.com an excellent publishing house with access to a grief digest and journal

www.columbia.edu/cu/news/00/02/graceChrist.html an expert on childhood bereavement looks at the ways in which children respond to a parental death from cancer

http://compassionbooks.com annotated list of books for purchase dealing with death, grief, serious illness, and all types of loss

http://web.archive.org/web/20031121200453/www.counselingforloss.com/article2.htm article on the three myths of children’s grief

www.cfw.tufts.edu the Child and Family Web Guide from Tufts University; provides links to grief-related sites

www.catholicreliefservices.org a monthly news service that contains pertinent articles about traumas children face globally as well as current interventions (relief projects)

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk Although this site is located in the United Kingdom, its resources cross geographic boundaries; excellent information specifically for schools and a downloadable brochure for children “After Someone Dies: A Leaflet about Death, Bereavement and Grief for Young People”

www.dougy.org a well-known and well-respected center for grieving children and families; Web site includes publications as well as information

www.familymanagement.com/facts/english/children.grief.html includes excellent article on children and grief that is also available in Spanish

www.nasponline.org National Association of School Psychologists Web site; includes generic information about children and grief and usually includes information about coping with large-scale disasters like September 11th and Hurricane Katrina.

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/bereavement.html National Institutes of Health PDQ file on coping with loss, also available in Spanish; other relevant listings as well

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/information/get-info/grief-and-bereavement/helping-children-cope-with-loss National Mental Health America Web site; short handout on grief as well as links to other relevant sites

www.pbs.org/wnet/onourown/terms/articles/children.html excellent article "A Guide to Children's Grief" written by a national bereavement expert

http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htm national expert answers questions about helping children deal with traumatic events

www.childrenslit.com This Web site recommends age-appropriate material for students. Check with your librarian to see if your school has a subscription.

www.hazelden.org/lifelines *Lifelines: A Suicide Prevention Program* is an evidence-based suicide prevention program for students in middle and high school. This curriculum has been approved by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Printed Resources

Students are often able to approach the topics of death, loss, and grief through identification with fictional characters. Sometimes, however, the most effective approach to these topics is indirectly from metaphorical perspectives. Metaphor speaks to the unconscious mind and allows the reader a personal interpretation of the presented material. When students are dealing with emotionally charged issues like death and trauma, metaphor allows them to take as much emotional distance as is personally necessary from the content.

Another category of literature you may want to consider are stories that enhance self-esteem or resiliency. No matter what the life situation, coping skills are essential to effective management of feelings and problems. Students who are

able to generalize problem-solving skills from one situation to another tend to be more resilient than peers who look for new solutions each time they encounter a challenge.

In particular, the following books on grief and death are highly recommended:

***Books to Grow With* by Cheryl Coon (2004), Lutra Press**

This is an annotated listing of over five hundred books recommended to help children deal with everyday issues and tough challenges. The section on death addresses a variety of losses including parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, and pets. It provides advice on how to get out-of-print books, and whether or not a book is available in Spanish.

***After the Crisis: Using Storybooks to Help Children Cope* by Cathy Grace and Elizabeth Shores (2010), Gryphon House**

The literature-based activities in *After the Crisis* help children who have been through a trauma. With activities and exercises that can be used in conjunction with fifty children's books, teachers can use the discussion starters, writing activities, and art activities in *After the Crisis* to promote children's ability to cope and heal.

***How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies* edited by Arthur J. Magida (2001), Galen Press, Ltd.**

This book explains cultural funeral customs and includes advice on protocol for funeral attendance in a variety of religious settings.

About the Author

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Maureen Underwood is a licensed clinical social worker and certified group psychotherapist with over thirty-five years of experience in mental health and crisis intervention. From 1985 to 2000, she was the coordinator of the New Jersey Adolescent Suicide Prevention Project. In this role, she initiated collaborative relationships between mental health and educational systems statewide, providing in-service training, consultation on policy development, and assistance in the implementation of procedures for school-based crisis management. In addition to her other numerous publications, Maureen is the co-author of *Lifelines: A Suicide Prevention Program* and *Managing Sudden Traumatic Loss in the Schools*, and the author of the National Association of Social Work's policy statement on adolescent suicide. In her current role as the clinical director of the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, Maureen has developed a series of online videos and resources for educators, parents, and students in youth suicide prevention.