

Students and Grief

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The primary task is to create a safe school environment for grieving.

Depending on the wishes of the family, information about the family's loss should be shared personally and directly with the student's teacher and, in turn, the teacher or school mental health professional can inform the student's classmates and other close friends. School mental health professionals can be a source of support for the entire home-school community.

INFORMING CLASSMATES AND FRIENDS

- The information should be factual and brief, yet sensitively delivered.
- Acknowledge your own feelings about the loss or a similar loss, and your feelings of sadness for the student.
- Allow students to express their feelings and reactions, even if harsh (e.g., anger, fear, relief it did not happen to them). Validate those feelings.
- Provide developmentally appropriate education about the feelings that go with grieving, such as irritability or anger, sadness, guilt, self-blame, or denial.
- Prepare staff members and students to welcome the student back to school and to acknowledge the loss.
- Encourage teachers and students to invite the bereaved student to talk about the loss if he or she feels ready.
- A key role for the classroom teacher is to provide a nurturing environment.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

- Discuss with teachers the student's usual level of functioning in terms of affect, academic performance, and social interaction.
- Alert school staff members to any potential signs and symptoms of traumatic or complicated grieving.
- Regularly consult with teachers and other school staff regarding their observations of the student's emotional responses, especially as manifested in mood, academics, and social relations.

SCHOOL-WIDE TRAGIC EVENTS

Tragic events, from bus accidents to school shootings to natural disasters that may result in student and/or teacher deaths impact the entire home–school community. Deaths during adolescence typically occur because of accidents and interpersonal or self-inflicted violence. Thus, nearly all schools in the United States have a crisis plan in place to guide emergency response.

Crisis Teams

- Most schools have crisis plans and crisis teams in place.
- School communities rely on well-trained crisis teams comprising school mental health professionals, administrative and teaching staff, and outside professionals as needed to help them respond to the death of a student or staff member.
- The primary goal following a crisis is to help students feel safe.
- In addition to helping students to feel safe, it is important to help them to remain engaged with supportive peers, school staff, and family, and to cope with the resulting thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
- Providing information, support groups, and individual counseling is an important part of the school’s response. The initial emphasis is on general education about trauma, loss, and bereavement.
- Support groups can be made available for students who choose to participate.
- Individual grief counseling can be provided for students who self-identify or who are referred by teachers or parents for more intensive help.

Support for Family and Staff

- A designated school mental health professional should reach out to the family of the deceased student or teacher to offer condolences and to learn what information can be shared with the school community, particularly the student’s classmates and friends or the teacher’s students. A prepared statement, developed and reviewed by a school mental health professional with the family, may be a useful way for teachers to disseminate information to classrooms.
- Formal rituals for the participation of the school community that the family would prefer can be identified: funeral, memorial service, flowers, school-based memorial site, or donations in the name of the deceased.
- Staff meetings with teachers, administrators, and other school personnel should be scheduled in order to keep them informed and to process their feelings.
- Staff members should be taught to observe the signs and symptoms of complicated grieving. Changes in academic performance, social interaction, or affect may signal potential difficulty with grief.
- Information about grief and coping with loss can be distributed to parents, teachers, and adolescents.
- Developmentally appropriate ways of sharing memories about the student or staff member can be used to facilitate bereavement (e.g., through writing or art).
- Classroom discussion should make students aware of personal strengths and coping skills and leave them feeling they are not alone.
- A safe space in designated health offices, school counseling rooms, guidance office, or other spaces in the school can be made available for support to students, family, and staff members during the school day. These spaces should be staffed by school mental health professionals.