

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN GRIEF

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from any of the following:

- **Continued structure in the schedule for the day.** It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school where they can grieve with others. They can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule and showing up for all or many of their usual classes because there is a sense of routine. Suspend the academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period; in others, all day.
- **Consistency in discipline, with flexibility.** Often at these times, students feel that life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if the behavior of peers is not within the usual realm of the classroom. Exceptions may be made with expectations of how much academic work gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of school life which do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure. Students do not need for you to become an instant counselor. They do need for you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged. If your school is going through a tragedy or trauma, the first day or two may be a bit of an emotional roller coaster ride.
- **The truth about what has happened.** If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity and is essential to your credibility.
- **The opportunity to talk about the event** as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Also, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.
- **Understanding that this event might be a "trigger"** which is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something frightening in their histories.
- **Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that,** if they come from a dysfunctional home, their ability to cope with grief is likely diminished.
- **Being allowed to use the Safe Room** even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on schoolwork until they've had the opportunity to process some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the Safe Room, and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving process.

- **To find meaning in the event.**

• **Help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students about whether they've ever been to a funeral, what it was like, and what to expect with this one.

Encourage students to:

- **Support each other** for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- **Put extra energy into friendships.** Exchange phone numbers with each other.
- **Take good care of themselves** by eating well and getting lots of rest.

Facilitating Classroom Discussion - Guidelines

In general, informing and discussing a traumatic event with students is best done in small-groups where questions can be answered, rumors clarified, and concerns addressed. Some students may choose not to enter into discussion, and some may even express a desire to be excused. Don't force the situation; honor the student's wishes.

Students often start off by saying such things as:

I feel terrible.

S/he was my friend.

Why did it have to happen?

I'm really mad that it happened.

We knew he was upset; we should have done something.

Things like this don't make sense.

It could happen to me.

It's just one of those things.

I can't believe it.

If it weren't for (name of someone), it wouldn't have happened.

You can often help keep students more fully express their thoughts and feelings by paraphrasing what they have just said. Try not to make intrusive comments. At the same time, move the discussion away from any attempts to glamorize or romanticize the event.

After they have been able to express themselves, you need to let them know that what they are thinking and feeling is very natural under the circumstances and that, for some of them, it may take a while before such thoughts and feelings are worked through.

Be sure to tell them that who is available to students if they or a friend are very upset. Watch for any student who appears very upset and follow predetermined procedures for connecting that student with someone who is ready to provide psychological first aid.

Center for Mental Health in the Schools at UCLA. (2004). [A resource aid packet on responding to a crisis at a school.](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu) Los Angeles, CA: Author. Revised May 004. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMA/GRIEF

1. **Listen** – Provide opportunities for children to talk and express whatever they are feeling and thinking.
2. **Be supportive and non-judgmental** – Let children have their own reactions. Don't tell children what they should or should not feel.
3. **Support children in expressing feelings, verbally and non-verbally** – Talking, crying, drawing, writing and playing are all helpful ways to process reactions. Children will often work through their feelings through play and may re-enact the death, trauma, funeral, etc. with playmates, dolls and other toys. This is a normal and healthy way for children to heal.
4. **Be honest and provide accurate information appropriate to the child's ability to understand and wish to know** – In order to cope, children need to trust that we will be honest with them. The unknown and the imagined can be much more terrifying than the truth.
5. **Be patient** – Realize that this will take time. Children may take longer than adults to resolve trauma and grief. Their processing of it may be intermittent. They may need to ask the same questions over and over.
6. **Share your feelings** – It is okay for children to know that you are human and have feelings, too, but don't overburden your children with your anxieties. Make sure you take care of yourself and have good support from other adults.
7. **Provide affection and reassurance regarding safety issues** – Let your children know that they are loved and that the adults in their lives will do their best to keep them safe. Children may temporarily need extra safety measures: i.e., sleeping in your room, leaving lights on, etc. You may want to say, "We will do this for a while and then get back to normal."
8. **Maintain order, security and stability in your children's lives** – Children need regular routines and structure to continue as much as possible.
9. **Give choices so that children have a sense of control and participation** – Ask: What would help you feel safe? Do you want to go to the memorial service?
10. **Memorialize** – Light candles. Create a scrapbook or memory book. Write letters to the person who has died. Ritual helps us heal.

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