

TEACHERS...



HOW TO ASSIST GRIEVING STUDENTS

Following the death of a student, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. This handout is intended to provide a guide for your use in assisting the students in your classes through the next few days and weeks as they resolve their feelings related to this death.

Normal grief is generally characterized by progression from an initial state of shock and denial, to anger, to disorganization and despair; and many youngsters may arrive at school already "buzzing" with the news. Rumors will have already started before school convenes, but there will also be many youngsters who arrive today with no knowledge of the deceased student's death. Youngsters might be saying the following:

"I just can't believe it!"

"Not him/her. It can't be."

"This must be a joke."

Other youngsters will quickly move to being angry. They will want to blame anyone and everyone for the death (other friends, parents, police, teachers, medical personnel, and themselves).

Guilt will be a feeling many youngsters may experience and want to discuss. In the aftermath of a death, many youngsters go back and retrace their last encounter with the person who has died and often blow out of proportion small fights that may have occurred which adds to their guilt.

The death may bring up memories or thoughts of previous losses, and they may not be upset about the person who has died but about a loss they have experienced before.

The most important thing teachers can do is to allow some opportunity for students to acknowledge and discuss their feelings. By acknowledging the pain and grief they are experiencing and by reassuring them of the normalcy of their feelings, you help them through the grief process. The following are some "Do and Don't" suggestions for discussing death with your students.

SUGGESTIONS ON HOW STUDENTS MAY COMFORT THOSE WHO GRIEVE:

1. **Be there**--visit, spend time with the grieving person, be friendly, get the grieving person involved.
2. **Listen**--grieving people need to talk.
3. **Send a note**--keep them short. Enclosing a picture might be appropriate at the elementary level.
4. **Extend an invitation**--Bereaved people often decline invitations or cancel, but don't give up (ask again later).

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW STUDENTS CAN DEAL WITH STRESS:

- Talk to a friend.
- Talk to parents.
- Talk to a counselor.
- Talk to a teacher.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat regularly and eat a balanced diet.
- Get physical exercise.
- Do something you enjoy.
- Help another person.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER:

- Grief is a natural result of loss.
- The duration of grief varies.
- People seldom experience the grief stages in the exact sequence. They may skip stages.
- Distress occurs when people stop the healing process and get themselves stuck in one stage.
- Expect delayed reactions. Reactions may be physical, interpersonal, or academic.
- Remember that children's ideas about death will vary with their developmental level.

Ages	Common Reactions
2 ½-5	Do not see death as permanent. May confuse death with sleeping or being away. May see death as punishment or violence. May see death as caused by or related to them. May see as related to anger. Might think it's contagious. May think dead people live underground.
5-9	May view death as possible for others only.
9-11	Believe in the irreversibility of death; death becomes more real, final, universal, and inevitable. Differentiate between living and non-living and may show interest in biological aspects and funeral details.
12-18	Understand the impact more fully. May view suicide as a means of "getting back" at someone but also see it as reversible because some survive it; some try it more than once, and they acknowledge that life is fragile.

DO:

The most helpful intervention a teacher can use is to encourage and allow for the expression of feelings related to death. For many of your students this may be their first encounter with death. They will look to you for guidance and modeling. Consider the following suggestions in discussing the death with your students:

- ✓ Share with students the feelings you experienced when you were told of the death— shock, sadness, and confusion.
- ✓ Reminisce about your relationship with the deceased student. Share what you will remember about him/her.
- ✓ Encourage your students to share positive memories and experiences they have had with the person who died.
- ✓ Discuss students' feelings about the loss, including possible feelings of guilt or of responsibility. Let students know these feelings are normal. You may wish to discuss the normal stages of grief. Remember that some students may not know the deceased student and may not feel sad. Then they need to know this is all right, too.
- ✓ Reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened.
- ✓ Ask students to be supportive of one another and to escort any friend who is upset to a teacher or the crisis center. Reassure them that many adults in the building are available to help.
- ✓ Encourage them to discuss their feelings with their parents.
- ✓ Be an active listener! This technique encourages students to recognize the normalcy of their feelings.
- ✓ Handle questions of theology by explaining that people believe many things and encourage them to discuss this with their parents.

Students may need to

CRY

BE HELD

HOLD EACH OTHER

HAVE QUESTIONS ANSWERED; TALK

UNDERSTAND HOW OTHER CHILDREN MAY REACT

DON'T:

- ✓ Don't say, "It could be worse..."
- ✓ Don't say, "I'll bet you feel..."
- ✓ Don't say, "Everything is going to be okay."
- ✓ Don't say, "But you still have..."
- ✓ Don't say, "You're the man/woman of the house now."
- ✓ Don't use these phrases as they give mixed messages:
"Passed away," "sleeping," "taken from us," "resting," or "is sleeping in the arms of God" (The child may have subsequent sleep disturbances and be afraid to go to bed.)

Stages of grief may be expressed in the following ways in student behavior. Concerns about serious behavior issues should constitute a referral to a counselor or parent. See the following table for behaviors and possible responses:

Behavior	Dealing with Behavior
Acting Out	Anger directed at anybody. Provide reassurance; avoid lecturing.
Lack of Feelings	Student is trying to protect self. Understand this is natural for some people.
Physiological Change	Tired, lack of appetite, headaches, stomach pains, daydreaming, tears, loss of manual skills. Symptoms of not mourning openly. Open discussion, write, draw, etc. Medical attention may be necessary.
Fear	Fear of being alone, death, bedtime, school, friendships. Be sensitive to fears; accept fears and questions; understand they need warmth and acceptance.
Guilt and Self-blame	Natural. May believe their thoughts caused actions. May seek self-punishment. Help them understand death isn't anything they can control and if a person commits suicide it's his/her choice. Emphasize positive steps to dealing with your problems.
Relief	Often overlooked; natural after a long illness. Reassure the child that relief does not imply lack of love.
Loss/emptiness/sadness	Often most difficult. Realization that the person is not coming back. Child may idealize the deceased. Provide a regular presence of caring.
"Big Man/Woman" Syndrome	Taking on the role of a lost parent. Child tries to fix things and may want to become heavily involved in handling financial and funeral arrangements. The surviving parent might welcome such efforts. Be aware of this pattern and seek intervention if needed.
Disorganization and Panic	Child is overwhelmed. Be a consistent presence as a trusting adult. Younger children may need to talk about death a lot.
Regression	Immature behavior. Child may want to be rocked, sleep with parent, talk baby talk, etc. Try not to repress the behavior. Meet the needs with affection and reassurance.