

Guidelines for responding to the death of a student or school staff

These guidelines are designed to help school administrators, teachers, and crisis team members respond to the needs of students and staff after a loss has impacted the school environment, such as after the death of a student or staff member or when deaths occur that affect many people in the community.



Bereavement is common among school children. For school personnel, this means that it is highly likely you will encounter a grieving student almost every day, even if you do not see any outward or visible signs of grief. In some communities, violent deaths may be sadly common – although students in these high-risk communities may appear to be “used to loss,” they are likely to have more difficulty adjusting to multiple losses.

Well-informed teachers and school personnel can be a source of support for students, but unintentionally they may, if not well-informed, be a source of stress. For example, not understanding reactions may lead to misinterpretation of behavioral reactions to loss as misbehavior and disrespect for others.

How long it may take for students to adjust to the loss will vary, but most children are not “over a loss” in six months or a year. As such, appropriate services should be planned for the immediate aftermath, the months following the loss, and for the long-term.

Schools can be the best setting to provide services to students (and staff) after a loss that affects the school community:

1. Schools provide a familiar environment.
2. Large numbers of students can be served.
3. Many children will benefit from supportive services that can be readily provided in a school setting.
4. Students coping after the loss can be monitored over time and referrals for clinical services can be facilitated as needed.
5. Parents may be more willing to accept services provided in school settings, where the stigma associated with mental health services may be decreased.

By the time children complete high school, most will experience the death of a family member or friend, with 5% of children experiencing the death of a parent by 16 years of age.

SCHOOL CRISIS TEAM INTERVENTIONS

Responding to a Student or Staff Death in a School Setting

When a death occurs, activate the school’s crisis team and plan to address the loss. Coordinate efforts with other schools that may also be impacted.

1. First, it is extremely important to verify the information (e.g., from family members or local authorities).
2. Next, determine what information the family would like to have disclosed (or what information has already been released publicly from a reliable source).
3. Once the death has been verified, notify the school staff and students.

NOTIFICATION

1. **Notify the School Crisis Team and Develop a Plan.** Consider activating the school crisis team. If initial notification occurs outside of school hours, this may require initiating the phone tree or email to notify the school staff and to invite them to meet before school to organize a unified plan and to brief school staff. If notification occurs during school hours, this may require the distribution of a written statement or a staff meeting.
2. **Notify Teachers and Other Staff First.** Meet before school with school teachers and other staff to discuss what is known about the death. This gives teachers an opportunity to ask any questions they wish and to prepare themselves before they see their students in class. If a teacher does not feel able to talk to his/her students about the death, a member of the crisis team should be available to step in or assist with the notification.

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3. **Notify Students Face-to-Face with Familiar Staff.** If a teacher has died, consider having a teacher from the same or a lower grade who is familiar with the deceased teacher's students, or a teacher from the school crisis team who is more comfortable, notify that class. Consider having this teacher remain with the class over the next couple days and have a substitute cover for the less directly impacted class.
4. **Prepare a Statement for Students.** Adults often struggle with what to say. With a prepared statement, teachers can give the same information to all students simultaneously. This should be done in small, naturally occurring groups such as homeroom or first period classes; every effort should be made to ensure that all students are present at the time this information is shared. Include information about the availability of mental health and support services and how students may access those services. Avoid use of public address systems or large assemblies to make such announcements.
5. **Prepare a Statement for Parents.** Draft a letter for parents to notify them about the death and what services are being offered to students and families. Assure parents that crisis teams have been mobilized and support services are available. (*Template letters, that schools can have in advance of a crisis so that notification statements can be quickly and easily prepared, are available at schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/samples-templates.*)

CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL

1. **Help Students with Coping Behaviors to Support and Maintain their Attendance and Classroom Learning:** Following a loss, addressing the event with students directly may decrease the negative impact on school attendance and learning. This can be done individually and in group settings. Students may express many different emotions and feelings. The goal is to allow this expression in a safe and non-judgmental environment.
2. **Help Students Deal with Difficult Feelings:** Students may also have feelings of regret, particularly if they believe they had mistreated the individual in the past. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable as a group with an increased risk of feeling depressed or anxious and engaging in self-blame or guilt related to the loss. If the death was a suicide (see Special Circumstances below), these feelings may be heightened.
3. **Help Younger Students:** Younger students may have more difficulty understanding death and are more likely to have literal misinterpretations in response to explanations (e.g., if told the deceased is in everlasting sleep, they may become fearful at bedtime). All students (and staff) are likely to experience some guilt feelings after a death, even if there is no logical reason.
4. **Establish Crisis Counseling or Grief Counseling Support Rooms and Protocols:**
 - » Establish procedures for leaving class (e.g., Will a pass be required? Should a student who is very distressed be escorted to the support room?) and for returning to class before the end of the period. If a student remains in the support room at the end of the period, be sure notice is provided to the classroom teacher for that period as well as the next one. Such actions ensure that the school has accurate knowledge about student whereabouts.

In the immediate aftermath of a death, limit off-grounds privileges if indicated and establish procedures to clear students prior to leaving school grounds during the school day.

- » More extensive services will be needed in the immediate aftermath of a school-wide crisis. Consider having support and counseling services available to students and school personnel before, during and after school hours in the immediate aftermath.
 - » Plan for ongoing and long-term services to be available to students. If the death was due to a school crisis, plans should be made for commemoration and memorialization, especially at the time of the anniversary of the death(s) (*Further guidelines on memorialization and commemoration can be found online at grievingstudents.org/module-section/commemoration-and-memorialization.*) Additional services should also be planned for dates and events that may serve as triggers for grief of students or staff, such as graduation, the prom, athletic events (if the deceased was an athlete), etc.
 - » Have substitute teachers available that can rotate among classes to allow teachers to seek supportive services in teacher/staff support rooms during school hours.
 - » If the death(s) are associated with a crisis that has impacted the community, consider some support services for parents at school in the immediate aftermath.
 - » School counselors, school nurses, school psychologists and school social workers can help teachers identify risk factors and signs of distress that may indicate the need for mental health services above what is offered at school. As with any counseling services, parents should be notified if additional services are recommended.
 - » Especially after traumatic losses (e.g., suicide or homicide), be proactive and set the tone for students to seek out counseling and support staff if they have troubling thoughts. Encourage students to identify friends they may be concerned about. These include students who have suicidal thoughts or have made threatening statements.
5. **Guidelines for Identifying Students Who May be at Higher Risk for Emotional Distress:**
 - » Students who were close friends of the deceased
 - » Students who shared a class with the deceased. Have a member of the crisis team follow the deceased student's schedule to help determine classmates that may benefit from extra attention.
 - » Students who shared extracurricular activities with the deceased
 - » Students who shared a similar characteristic with the deceased. This will depend on the circumstances of the death (e.g., chronic illness – other students with chronic illness; suicide after bullying – students who may be bullied or who had pre-existing depression; car accident – students that have recently received their driving licenses; or pedestrian accident – students who walk to school).
 - » Students with a troubled or strained relationship with the deceased

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- » Students from other schools if the deceased recently transferred or has siblings at another school
- » Students with a history of prior or concurrent losses and/or emotional difficulties.

6. Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials

- » **Participation of Students:** Students may wish to attend the memorial services and/or funeral of the deceased student or teacher. Talk to the family of the deceased and determine their wishes. If many students or staff are likely to attend, inquire if there may be visitation hours/memorial services outside of school hours. If the services are during school hours, establish a policy for student absence that allows students who have a close relationship to the deceased to attend. Have substitute teachers available for teachers who wish to attend the services. Consider arranging for crisis counseling staff to attend after-hours services that are likely to be attended by large numbers of students.
- » **Spontaneous Memorials:** Informal memorials are likely to “spring up” after the death of a student or teacher. Plans to handle the flowers, cards, etc. should be made in advance. Determine the time period that the memorial will remain (e.g., one or two weeks), and communicate to students that the memorial will be removed after that time and indicate what will be done with the non-perishable items (e.g., stuffed animals will be sent to a local daycare center, etc.). Providing alternate commemorative opportunities for the students and engaging students early on in the response efforts or an announcement about the family’s wishes may help to minimize these spontaneous memorials.
- » **Timing of Memorial Activities at School:** Commemorative activities and memorialization efforts should not be a focus of the crisis response in the immediate aftermath of a death. If done too soon, there may be a perception that the school is trying to “close the chapter” on grieving.
- » **Equitable Policies:** In general, schools should avoid formal commemorative or memorialization activities or acts (e.g., naming a building or hanging a plaque) to mark the death of a popular student or staff member since failure to respond in the future in a similar manner to the death of a less popular student/staff may raise equity concerns; schools may be reluctant to provide similar responses after certain deaths (e.g., suicide, drug overdose) in order to minimize glamorization of the cause of death (see Special Circumstances below). Instead, less formal but thoughtful commemorative activities developed over time with active student involvement is often much more meaningful (and therapeutic) to students and staff. Such commemoration is more likely to recognize and preserve essential memories of the deceased than are more routine and reactive efforts instituted shortly after notification.

(Further information about developing appropriate commemorative and memorialization activities in schools can be found online at grievingstudents.org/module-section/commemoration-and-memorialization.)

- » **Constructive Expression of Grief:** Students may wish to write letters/draw pictures to send to the deceased student’s or staff member’s family. Be sure these are

reviewed before sending them out. Also, be careful not to interpret the drawings and writings without adequate input from mental health professionals. Avoid activities that solicit public anonymous statements, such as creating places for students to express their thoughts anonymously about the deceased, as school teachers and staff will not be able to identify students who may express worrisome thoughts (e.g., suicidal ideation or threatening statements).

- » **Handling Traumatic Reminders for Students:** School desks and lockers may serve as unwelcome reminders of the deceased student(s). Consider procedures for handling these, drawing on the input of the classmates.
- » **Personal Effects of the Deceased:** Arrange with parents/family members for the return of belongings that is at a time convenient for them, preferably after school hours. Have the personal effects available at the office so that parents/families are not presented with the emotional challenge of having to clean out a locker or desk. Have a member of the crisis team or a school counselor present when parents come to retrieve a child’s belongs.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

1. **The Role of the PIO:** Media attention is likely after a death of a student or school staff. This is best handled by the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the district or the principal at the school site. Teachers, staff, and parents should be made aware that all media requests should be referred to this individual.
2. **Protect Students from Being Re-Traumatized:** The focus of all communications, including media coverage, should be on the protection of students and the school environment from unwanted intrusive attention. Television coverage of the event should not be watched in the classroom during school hours. Information about how to handle media requests can be distributed to parents.
3. Ongoing communication between parents and school teachers and staff about how students are doing will be important to ensure appropriate support and intervention services in the immediate aftermath of a death and in the long-term. Parents of children identified as at-risk for mental health difficulties should be given information about whom to contact with concerns and about positive progress. School personnel should also keep parents informed about their children’s functioning at school (e.g., school work, peer relationships, and behaviors). Again, parents should be provided with information related to common reactions after a death as well as behaviors that may signal the need for more intensive mental health services.
4. The formal establishment of communications and liaison with community resources is important to develop prior to any type of crisis. Developing a relationship and crisis response role with community-based mental health professionals in advance of the need will allow the school to quickly and effectively activate these resources in times of need. They can provide mental health services at the school as well as be available for students and staff who may need more intensive services. Furthermore, mental health experts can assist schools in:

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- » Crisis team development
- » Crisis preparedness planning and exercises
- » In-service trainings around school crisis and bereavement
- » Consultation on issues of child development, crisis and bereavement

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

1. **Suicide of a Student:** The suicide of a student creates unique issues for school personnel.
 - » Clarify with family about information they wish to disclose about the cause of death, but be aware if information has already been shared publicly by a reliable source.
 - » Identify students considered at greatest risk for mental health distress. (Use the same ideas as listed above, especially any students who may have known of the plan or students who may become “scapegoats” after the death.)
 - » Educate students, staff, and parents about warning signs and symptoms of suicide and distribute broadly information about hotlines and support services.
 - » Encourage students to seek help; de-stigmatize and legitimize the importance of mental health services and communication with others who can help.
 - » While being sure to acknowledge the individual who died, avoid romanticizing or glamorizing suicide.
 - » Minimize media coverage of the suicide.
 - » Be aware of any suicides in the larger community by maintaining good communication with other area schools, community mental health providers/agencies, and the police.

(Further guidelines on school and students support in the event of suicide can be found at schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/-guide-responding-suicide/.)

2. **Other Situations When the Family May Not Wish to Disclose the Cause of Death** (e.g., driving while intoxicated or other alcohol-related death, overdose, related to self-inflicted or intentional asphyxiation): As with any death of a student, initiate the school crisis plan and support services. Like suicide, the death may present a “window of opportunity” to educate students, staff, and parents about life-threatening behaviors and their consequences. Many of the issues to consider with suicide will also apply to these circumstances.
3. **Circumstances in Which School Liability May be an Issue:** Although the circumstances of the death do not have to be discussed, the death itself will need to be addressed and support services provided to staff and students. Sending letters to parents alerting them of the death as well as available services remains important.
4. **Death of Student or School Personnel When School is Not in Session:** If a death occurs that is likely to impact broadly the school community when school is not in session, such as

over the summer or other vacation, involve the school crisis team in developing a plan including how to contact students and staff such as via telephone trees, email, and mailings.

School administrators may wish to offer the school building as a place for support services to be offered in the immediate aftermath of the event and may choose to communicate this through public media. When school resumes after the holiday or vacation, additional plans should be in place for notification of those students and staff not previously contacted. Have crisis team members and supportive services available once this information is shared with students and staff.

IMPACT ON LEARNING

Reactions after a loss can have a significant impact on learning. Students may

1. Show a decline in school performance
2. Have difficulty mastering new material
3. Become more irritable
4. Become more withdrawn
5. Become more anxious or depressed
6. Become more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, promiscuity, reckless driving, and suicide attempts in adolescents
7. Become focused on the loss

Students should be offered additional supports, such as tutoring or participation in mentoring programs to assist them in maintaining their academic progress before academic failure occurs, which would represent an additional stressor.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

1. *Listen* – to what students want to share with you. It may be difficult but just listening can be a powerful healing force.
2. *Protect* – students from becoming re-traumatized. Sometimes other students may ridicule or bully students who are highly emotional or cry.
3. *Connect* – with students who have suffered a loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know that you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.
4. *Model* – adult behavior that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school.
5. *Teach* – Crisis counselors can teach students about the common signs and symptoms of grief and/or trauma so that students can assess and understand their own behavior and learn new ways of coping.

Visit schoolcrisiscenter.org for other helpful resources.