

Valentine's Day and Grieving Students



Schools host a profusion of fun and playful activities for Valentine's Day. There might be hallway and classroom decorations, card exchanges, singing telegrams, flower exchanges, valentines for parents and more. How do these spirited activities affect grieving students? And what steps can education professionals take to offer support?

HOW DO GRIEVING STUDENTS FEEL?

Every student's experiences are unique. In a general sense, however, it can be tough for grieving children and teens to feel surrounded by the exuberant expressions of love, connection, affection, and romance seen on Valentine's Day. Even several years after a loss, such celebrations can trigger a resurgence of grief. Students may feel caught off-guard by powerful feelings—sadness, loneliness, resentment, anger, or others.

These feelings can be confusing and even contradictory—missing a loved one, feeling guilty about a heated exchange before the death, being resentful about an abusive or neglectful relationship, believing oneself responsible for the death in some way. While most students will not be grieving the loss of a romantic partner, those who are may be challenged by the amorous themes of Valentine's Day. They may miss their partner deeply. They might believe that they will never again have a close relationship. They may feel guilty because they're ambivalent about the relationship or the deceased.

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

- If you know a student has experienced the death of a family member or close friend, speak privately before Valentine's Day activities. Describe upcoming activities so the student knows what to expect. Offer alternatives if the student wishes.
- Introduce activities thoughtfully and keep them flexible. For example, instead of asking students to make a valentine for parents, invite them to make a valentine for their parents or someone else they care about. If students are drawing a picture about ways their family celebrates Valentine's Day, suggest they may also draw a picture of another celebration they've enjoyed, or one they would like to attend.
- Reach out to grieving students during these types of celebrations with a simple, caring check-in: "I know these activities can be hard for someone who has experienced the death of someone close. I'm wondering how this is all going for you."

LEARN MORE

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students (www.grievingstudents.org) hosts a website with videos and downloadable modules providing more information about students and grief. These tools can be of immeasurable assistance to educators and Grief-Sensitive Schools. Modules especially relevant for grief responses to holidays include:

- Grief Triggers <https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/grief-triggers/>
- Guilt & Shame <https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/guilt-shame/>
- Providing Support Over Time <https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/providing-support-over-time/>
- Commemoration and Memorialization <https://grievingstudents.org/module-section/commemoration-and-memorialization/>

COPING WITH GRIEF ON VALENTINE'S DAY

- Think of Valentine's Day as a way to reflect on your continuing bond with those who died.
- Accept feelings of sadness, and also look for joyful moments in the memories brought up by Valentine's Day.
- Know that feelings of grief can be painful and confusing. It's not unusual to sometimes feel anger, resentment, guilt, or shame.
- You may feel you missed opportunities to say or do something important with the person who died. Be forgiving towards yourself. Avoid being judgmental about perceived shortcomings in your past based on how you feel in the present.