



Practical Strategies for Educators to Support Students after a Death or Other School/Community Crisis

The “5 E” Model

Practical strategies for all educators — including those without a mental health background — to support students after a crisis or loss and to empower them to take an active role in their own coping and recovery.

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The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement developed the “5 E” model to outline practical strategies for use by all educators, including those without a mental health background, to support students after a death or other school or community crisis. The model goes beyond more typical advice on how adults can support students, to identify strategies that empower students to take a more active role in their coping and recovery. Following a crisis, students often feel vulnerable and isolated; building a trusting relationship and empowering students are key components of the model. Through the provision of information and assistance in applying coping strategies, school staff can help students begin to feel confident that they can cope with and adjust to crisis and loss.

Following a crisis or loss, it is common to see temporary changes in behavior, emotions, and thoughts that affect school performance and relationships. Over time, however, most children will recover without mental health treatment — a process that can be aided and accelerated by a caring adult who provides compassion, reassurance, and guidance. If instead students are led to feel entirely dependent on adults for their safety and coping, they may be more likely to continue to feel vulnerable. Providing social support and fostering students’ confidence that they can face whatever may come, helps move them toward recovery. This guide is intended to prepare you to provide that support while encouraging students’ personal empowerment.

	Strategies	Purpose
ENGAGE	Reach out and connect with students who have experienced a recent crisis. Even if you are empathic, approachable, and have said before that you are available to talk, take the first step to initiate the conversation after a crisis. Let the student know why you are reaching out and how you might help. Use the skills you already have as an educator to begin building a connection. Once a connection forms, invite the student to share as much as they feel comfortable about their experiences, but avoid pushing them to talk if they are reluctant. Start with less difficult, non-threatening questions, such as <i>“Who was with you when it happened?”</i> Active listening is key. Eye contact, positive body language, and restating what they tell you help students believe that what they are saying matters.	• Initiate the conversation in a way that invites students to share basic information about what they have experienced. • Begin the communication process. • Form a connection that can facilitate greater trust and disclosure as appropriate. • Encourage the student to have control or agency in what they disclose, and to whom.
EMPATHIZE	The goal is to demonstrate compassion, not to explore the details of what happened. Reassure students that a range of difficult feelings and thoughts is normal after a crisis, even for those who are emotionally healthy. Ask them to share about the <i>changes</i> in their daily life: <i>“What is it like being in school after what happened? Are there things you find hard to do in class or with homework right now?”</i> Show students that you not only understand what they are saying but also want to help — compassion goes beyond empathy. You do not need to solve all their problems. Focus on their feelings and concerns rather than sharing your own reactions to the crisis. Listen, and prompt with gentle probes if needed, but do not require them to respond or push them to share details of a potentially traumatic experience. Use their own words when following up: <i>“I hear you say that this makes you feel like others are blaming you. Can you share some examples of how others are treating you now?”</i> Thank them for beginning to share, and acknowledge that doing so can be hard after a crisis.	• Validate their needs and feelings. • Reduce their sense of aloneness or isolation through compassionate support. • Help them feel safe enough to share difficult feelings rather than hold them inside. • Let them know that someone is interested in listening because they matter. • Help students begin to trust someone who can help.

EXPLORE

Ask whether they are comfortable telling you a bit more about their experience and, especially, how it makes them feel. Reassure them that the purpose is to provide relevant help — and that you will keep the information private unless you need to tell someone to protect their safety, or they ask you to share it on their behalf.

The goal is not to draw out troubling details of a potentially traumatic event; mental health professionals are better able to help children process trauma, and limiting detail also reduces the risk of vicarious traumatization for educators. That said, do not hesitate to talk with grieving students about someone they knew who died — students often find comfort in sharing positive memories.

Focus on current needs and concerns. Ask what they are worried about, and do not introduce other worries you may have. Ask about basic needs and address them as you are able:

- Physical needs (e.g., food, water, a safe place to stay)
- Social needs (e.g., activities with friends, sports or play with peers)
- School needs (e.g., extra time on assignments, postponed tests, tutoring)
- Future needs (e.g., college applications, preparing for a dance or prom)

Ask how peers have been coping — have any strategies helped that might be worth trying? Are there reactions that seem confusing or worrisome? Sometimes it is easier for students to talk about how friends are reacting than to disclose their own worries, and this can empower them to identify coping strategies and foster mutual support.

After a community crisis, students may also describe how others outside school are reacting. Social media can shape coping; you may ask whether they have used it to share feelings, and whether anything they saw made them feel uncomfortable, upset, or worried.

- Identify present and continuing needs that can be addressed.
- Help the student learn from positive coping strategies used by peers, caregivers, family, and the wider community.
- Become aware of cultural and family influences and preferred strategies for coping.

EDUCATE

Help students understand what has happened so as to minimize unnecessary worry. Offer practical advice for coping with their reactions and addressing the needs they have shared. Clarify misconceptions, correct misinformation, and address rumors, sharing what limited information the school has at this time.

Explain the many ways grief and stress can be experienced and expressed — and that it is okay if a student prefers not to share their feelings with you. Describe common adjustment reactions in clear, simple language.

Avoid clinical labels such as “depression,” “acting out,” or “flashback,” which can make students guarded or feel judged, mentally ill, or damaged. For example, say *“I understand you keep thinking about what happened that day”* rather than *“It sounds like you are having flashbacks.”*

Note that a crisis often disrupts support systems — the people students usually rely on may be coping with their own reactions — and remind them of the supports available through the school. Set realistic expectations for recovery, one step at a time. Younger children may need help simply labeling and understanding their emotions as a first step.

- Reduce confusion and uncertainty with consistent, reliable information.
- Help them realize that what they are experiencing is not unique.
- Provide realistic hope for the future.
- Improve their understanding of their feelings and reactions.
- Help them build coping skills they can control.
- Help them recognize common adjustment reactions and understand these are not necessarily symptoms of mental illness, even when feelings are new, uncomfortable, or strong.

EMPOWER

Ask what tools they have used in the past during and after stressful events. Emphasize their personal strengths and coping tools, and help them identify available social supports. Reflect strengths you notice: *“I notice you have done a really good job talking about your feelings.” “You really spoke up for yourself when you told me you did not want to talk about something — speaking up can help you get what you need.”*

Ask what they think of suggestions from peers, caregivers, family, and culture, and which have helped. Help them draw on family and cultural wisdom and “best practices” they can use or adapt: *“People who care about you will share ideas about ways to cope, or you may have seen something peers have done. Which do you think are helpful tools you can try?”*

- Reduce the feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability that can follow a crisis by letting them voice their needs.
- Empower them to advocate for and assert their needs.
- Identify existing coping tools and strengths, and help build new coping strategies and skills.
- Develop their capacity to evaluate sources of support they may use in the future.

EMPOWER (continued)

Help them prepare responses that feel comfortable when peers or adults ask how they are doing, or make comments that are hurtful, intentionally or not: *“It is hard to handle all the questions. Keeping answers simple lets people know how you are doing — for example, ‘I am feeling better than last week,’ or ‘It has been hard,’ or ‘I appreciate your concern, but this is not a good time for me to talk about it.’”*

Help them feel empowered and confident that they can take active steps to move forward; continually dwelling on what happened can deepen feelings of powerlessness. Help them advocate for themselves by practicing how to express their feelings and needs. Younger children may struggle to say no to adults — reassure them they will not hurt an adult’s feelings by asking for more or different help: *“People who care about you want to help, but need to understand how you are feeling and what would be useful. Telling them directly is better than having them guess.”*

Help them find adults and peers — at school, at home, and in the community — they feel safe with and can rely on now and in the future. Help them weigh the supports they have received and decide whether to continue them or take on more themselves.

Summarize what you have learned together; consider writing a short list the student can return to later. Avoid asking too soon about resilience or growth, which can imply they should not still feel pain — help them set a realistic timeline for their feelings. Suggest that helping others, even unrelated to their own crisis, can restore a sense of agency and support recovery.

Invite them to talk again. Set a time to check in, and let them know how to reach you sooner if it would help. When you next talk, ask how they are doing and where they may feel “stuck,” help them find additional support, and help them recognize when they might be at risk and should seek more assistance.

- Help them draw on family and cultural wisdom and “best practices.”
- Promote a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy in coping with adversity.
- Allow time in recovery for feelings to be expressed and processed.

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