



WHEN A DEATH IMPACTS THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: A TIP SHEET FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

Check In

Yourself: Identify your own feelings and reactions to the death, which may be affected by other deaths you have experienced, your relationship to the person who died, and how the person died. The circumstances and unanswered questions around the death can also impact your response.

Colleagues: As you may have varying reactions, your colleagues may have many different responses to the death and the information provided. Some might find it helpful to communicate their feelings and thoughts soon after the death while others need time to process on their own. Be patient with each other especially when your reactions are different from those around you.

Students: Age, personality, maturity, relationship to the person who died, and other losses in life impact students' reactions to the news of a death. Allow students to express their feelings in a way that feels most comfortable, whether it's writing, drawing, talking, or other outlets. Be sensitive if there are students who do not want to express their feelings about the death. Sleeping, eating, and concentration may be impacted after a death.

Identify Supports

Yourself: Having support systems in and out of school is important in creating a supportive and healthy environment for yourself. Although your role includes helping and supporting students every day, this may be a time when you need to ask for support from others. A supervisor may be able to refer you to additional individual and group supports.

Colleagues: Everyone can be a helper in their own position and role in making the school a safe and functioning environment for all. Check in with each other and be a support for others to the extent you are able and remember that support may look different to everyone.

Students: Students may seek support from peers, school personnel, and people outside of school. It is important to recognize that all students do not require the same type of support. Being open, available, and genuine with students as they seek support will assist them in processing their thoughts and feelings. A student may or may not want to talk with you about the death, but if they feel they are in a supportive environment and not alone, they will have a better chance to grieve in a healthy way.

Grief is a normal part of life, no matter how difficult it may be to understand. While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, here are some things to keep in mind if you are struggling to support a student or staff member.

When a death occurs in a school community, it can be difficult for adults to know what to do and how to react. Whether it is the death of a student, faculty member, or parent, the loss can greatly impact the greater school community in and out of the classroom. It is vital for education professionals to be aware of how to best support grieving students and staff, as well as how to take care of their own needs and emotions.

To learn more about Uplift's Crisis Support Services contact:

Meghan Szafran, MS, CT
Director of School & Community Services
Email: meghan@grievingchildren.org
Phone: 267-437-3123 x 1

Remember Grief Reactions are Unique

Yourself: Reactions to a death are distinct to the individual and should not be judged. It's normal to experience a myriad of emotions right after a death and beyond, including anger, sadness, disbelief, confusion, guilt, and relief. You may also have physical reactions including trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and loss of appetite. It's important to be aware of these reactions and feelings and to implement healthy coping skills. Some may choose talking to others, writing, art, or physical activity to cope. Seek additional support if you feel you are struggling to manage your reactions in a healthy way.

Colleagues: Your colleagues are also experiencing their own array of personal reactions to the death. If you are able, talk with each other about how you are feeling and coping and the difficulties you may be having.

Students: Students will likely react in a variety of ways. It's important to recognize behaviors that may occur as a grief reaction and to try to understand what the student really needs. Frequent trips to the nurse, daydreaming in class, a sudden drop in grades, social isolation, or acting out could all be a student's way of responding to the death. Even if students did not have direct contact or a close relationship with the deceased, they still may have a response based on the school environment, their past experience with death, and other unknown factors.

The school counselor or social worker can assist in these situations to get the student the proper support so that they can succeed in school. Remember, there is no timeline for grief, so these reactions can occur any time after the death.

Establish Routine and Make a Space for Grief

Yourself: Getting back to your normal routine after a death can be helpful and difficult. Some people want to return to their daily activities right away, while others may find it hard to do so. Getting back to your routine in your own time is important to establish a new normal and to continue to live life. Allow yourself a space to grieve as you return to your routine.

Colleagues: Just like you may have trouble getting back to your routine, each person in the school community may be struggling. Talking about any difficulties in re-establishing routine and supporting each other in creating a new normal together can make this part of the process easier.

Students: Returning to the routine of school, while allowing accommodations as indicated, is especially important for your students. Accommodations are generally necessary after a death in the school community to acknowledge what has occurred and to provide a supportive environment for students to grieve. Although it may be difficult at times for them to focus on school while they are grieving, the routine is the familiar piece in an uncertain time. Understanding that students also need a space to grieve and allowing that space within the routine of the school day will be helpful to the student and the greater school community.

Just like the journey through life, your family, friends, culture, religion, and other life experiences shape your grief experience. Coming together as a school community after a death can be a source of comfort and support.



Additional Resources

Coalition to Support Grieving Students
www.grievingstudents.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.nctsnet.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children
www.childrengrieve.org

What's Your Grief?
www.whatsyourgrief.com

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

New York Life Foundation
www.newyorklife.com/achildgrief

