

When a Death Impacts the School Community: A Tip Sheet for Education Professionals

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.

Grief is a normal part of life, no matter how difficult it may be to understand. Although there is no right or wrong way to grieve, here are things to keep in mind when supporting grieving students, your colleagues, and yourself.

Check In

- **Yourself:** Identify your own feelings and reactions to the death. Your reactions may be informed by other deaths you have experienced, your relationship to the person who died, and how the person died. Circumstances and unanswered questions around the death can also impact your response.
- **Colleagues:** Just 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 share their feelings and thoughts soon after the death, while others might need time to process on their own. Be patient with each other, especially when your reactions differ.
- **Students:** Age, personality, maturity, relationship to the person who died, and other losses in life will 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 by writing, drawing, talking, or other outlets. Be sensitive if there are students who do not want to express their feelings about the death. Your students' sleeping, eating, and concentration may be impacted after a death.

Identify Support Systems

- **Yourself:** Create a supportive, healthy environment for yourself using support systems in and outside of school. Though 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:** Whatever their position and role, every faculty member can be help 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. 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 each student's support needs and support styles may look different. You can assist students in processing their thoughts and feelings by being open, available, and genuine with them. 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.

Remember Grief Reactions are Unique

- **Yourself:** Reactions to death are distinct to each individual and should not be judged. It's normal to have a myriad of emotions immediately after a death and in the following weeks and months, 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. You may choose to talk to others, write, make art, or engage in physical activity to cope. Seek additional support if you feel you are struggling to manage your reactions in a healthy way.

Remember Grief Reactions are Unique (continued)

- **Colleagues:** Your colleagues are also reacting to the death in their own personal ways. If you are able, talk with each other about how you are feeling, how you are coping, and difficulties you may be having.
- **Students:** Students will likely react in many ways. It's important to recognize behaviors that may be part of a grief reaction and to try to understand what students need. Frequent trips to the nurse, daydreaming in class, a sudden drop in grades, social isolation, or acting out could all be ways of responding to the death. Even if students did not have direct contact with or a close relationship to the deceased, they still may still show a grief response based on the school environment, their past experience with death, and other unknown factors.

In these cases, a school counselor or social worker can get students the proper support so they can succeed in school. Remember, there is no timeline for grief, so these reactions can occur any time after the death.

Establish Routines and Make Space for Grief

- **Yourself:** Returning 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:** In the same way that you may have trouble getting back to routine, each person in the school community may be struggling. This process can be made easier by talking about any difficulties in re-establishing routine and supporting each other in creating a new normal together.
- **Students:** It is especially important for your students to return to the routine of school, while allowing accommodations. Accommodations are generally necessary after a death in the school community to acknowledge the death 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.

Learn More About Uplift's Services

Uplift's **Philly HopeLine** is a free, confidential helpline staffed by our Master's level clinicians. The Philly HopeLine is open to all youth and caregivers in the Philadelphia region. Call if you'd like to sign up for grief groups, receive emotional or grief support, identify community resources, or get on the list for an in-school grief group, make a referral of a youth or family, or request a training. Interpretation service is available for more than 100 languages. Dial **833-PHL-HOPE (833-745-4673)** to speak to an Uplift clinician Monday - Thursday from 10 AM - 4 PM.

Resources

- Coalition to Support Grieving Students: grievingstudents.org
- National Alliance for Children's Grief: nacg.org
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement: schoolcrisiscenter.org
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: nctsn.org
- What's Your Grief: whatsyourgrief.com

A tip sheet from

Uplift Center for Grieving Children

Office: 267-437-3123

Philly HopeLine: 833-745-4673

www.UpliftPhilly.org

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