

# Forward

The death of an individual in the school community is a traumatic event and one in which the school needs to respond to in a caring and supportive manner. The development of this protocol comes from a belief that schools are a community of people who care for one another. In a caring environment, community members must be available to each other in happy as well as sad times. When grief is viewed as a normal reaction to loss, grief can be seen as a healthy and growth-producing experience.

Generally, the first reaction to a death is one of shock and disbelief, particularly if the death was sudden and unexpected. As the shock subsides, the emotional and physical pain associated with grieving becomes apparent. The role of emotional first aid providers is to encourage students and adults to express their emotions and to share with each other memories of the deceased. The gentle support all school community members give to each other during this time is the first step in healing.

For more information or additional copies of the protocol, please contact:

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Adapted from Mississippi Bend AEA School Crisis Manual



# **Crisis, Traumatic Event, Death, Grief, and Bereavement**

## **Crisis**

The death of a school community member can be a crisis event. A crisis is defined as a state of emotional turmoil. Emotional crises have four characteristics:

1. They are sudden.
2. The "normal" method of coping with stress failed.
3. Are short in duration. Most crises last from twenty-four to thirty-six hours and rarely for longer than six weeks.
4. Have potential to produce dangerous, self-destructive, or socially unacceptable behavior.

## **Traumatic Event**

A death of a school community member is a traumatic event if the impact on the students and staff is sufficient enough to overwhelm the usual effective coping skills. Traumatic events are typically sudden, powerful events which are outside the range of ordinary human experiences. Because of the suddenness of the event, even well-trained, experienced people can experience a sense of strong emotions.

## **Determining the Degree Of Trauma Following a Death**

Three variables are generally considered:

1. Who - The number of people the person who has died knew and his/her length of time at the school.
2. How - The circumstances of the death (suicide or murder generally result in more trauma than death by natural causes.)
3. Where - A death at school or to and from school and school-related activities generally results in more trauma.

## **Post-Traumatic Stress**

Some students may experience post-traumatic stress as a result of a traumatic event. Post-traumatic stress is a condition which is precipitated by an event beyond the range of typical experience. A student who has, for example, suffered repeated losses in their life may

experience post-traumatic stress upon the death of a friend. Also, students may experience post-traumatic stress if a catastrophe has occurred at school (i.e., shooting of teacher or students, natural disaster, etc.) Symptoms of post-traumatic stress include:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event (flashbacks).
- Avoidance of stimuli the person associates with the traumatic event.
- Numbing of general responsiveness.
- Pattern of distressful behavior which lasts longer than one month.

As with any severe anxiety, the helper can assist by:

- Providing a safe and supportive environment.
- Reassuring the person that the reaction is a normal reaction to abnormal stress.
- Helping the person discharge "pent-up" emotions and pain.

Often times, counseling groups provide the most support for the individual, particularly teenagers. The ideal group size is from six to eight members. The group sessions should be time limited with the purpose of providing mutual support and understanding as each group member deals with their reactions to the traumatic event.

## **Death**

The sudden loss of a student or adult in the school system is a tragic event and can be a point of crises for the school system. The school community's response to the death situation will set the stage for how well people cope with the loss. The best approach to a death is to acknowledge the death, encourage people to express their emotions and feelings, and provide adequate supportive assistance and counseling.

## **Bereavement**

Bereavement is the process of grieving. The process is unique for each person and may last from six months to two years.

## **Grief**

Grief is the sum of emotions and confusion we experience as a result of the death of someone important to us. Grief is mourning the loss of that person and mourning for ourselves.

All people grieve differently, depending upon their own life experiences. However, all grief is painful, and like all other pain, the body's first reaction to grief may be a feeling of numbness as if one were in shock.

# **Grief and Children**

## **Preschool to Age Nine**

This age child usually sees death as temporary and reversible. Between ages of five and nine, children begin to see death more like adults but still believe it will never happen to them.

## **Age Nine to Eleven**

Child begins to understand death can happen to them. Death is becoming more real. This age child may show keen interest in the cause of death, details of the funeral, and in the biological aspects of death.

## **Adolescents**

The adolescent searches for the meaning of life, which includes death. "Why" questions will be asked, many of which have no concrete answers. Often, adolescents' emotional response to death will be very intense and issues of unresolved grief of divorce of parents, etc., will emerge.

## **The Healing Process**

A major part of the healing process is allowing oneself to experience the intense emotions associated with the pain of grief.

The emotions typically experienced are:

- Anger
- Guilt
- Depression

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has developed five stages to the healing process:

- Denial and Isolation
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

## **Guidelines for Helping Someone Who Is Grieving**

When we are required to respond to a death, we ask ourselves: What should I do? What should I say? A few suggestions are:

- The best action is to take some kind of action. Let the students know how you feel, encourage them to express their feelings and provide support to those who are grieving. Do not restrict the amount of time for the conversations to be finished so that the student does not sense "urgency" in your conversation.
- Be a good listener and accept the words and feelings being expressed. Don't minimize the loss and avoid giving clichés and easy answers.
- Encourage the grieving person to care for themselves.
- Acknowledge and accept your own limitations. Sometimes you may wish to have the help of outside resources.

## **Emotional First Aid**

During the first few days following the death of a student or adult in the school community, each adult will be responsible for administering emotional first aid to those in distress. The goal of emotional first-aid is to give people permission to express their emotions during this time of acute distress.

Emotional first aid is the freely giving of support without becoming invasive. The first stage of emotional first aid is through words. Keep your words simple and be brief.

- Use simple questions.  
"Can I help?"
- Use simple suggestions.  
"It's okay to let it out."
- Use simple comments.  
"It must really hurt."  
"You must feel very bad."

During the grief process, a person may quickly switch emotions. The primary switch of emotions while crying is to anger. Encourage the person to express his/her anger without pushing it to the point of rage. The best way to be encouraging is to accept the person's feelings of anger.

When administering emotional first aid, don't push the contact with the grieving person. Take "no" for an answer. If you are concerned about the well-being of the person, stay nearby, find them something to drink, or make some gesture of caring for his/her well-being.

## Problematic Expressions of Grief

People grieve in different ways. Occasionally a student or adult may grieve in a manner that potentially could be harmful to the person. When administering emotional first aid, be aware of the following problematic expressions of grief:

- **Acting out:** Getting "carried away" by an enthusiastic expression of grief. Take the person's grief seriously and consult a crises management team member.
- **Self-pity:** This is a normal part of grief but at times becomes problematic in that it can bring out anger in the helper. The helper needs to restrain his/her emotions but still be guided by his/her feelings.
- **Freezing:** This can be a serious situation. This is when the grieving person has no affectual response. If attempts to communicate with the person fail, remain with the person and have someone get help.

## Self-Destructive Behavior

In rare instances, the person may become self-destructive by running around the room, crashing into objects. You may have to encourage the person to yell, restrain without harming, etc. Do not leave the person but get additional help as quickly as possible.

# Principal's Role

When any individual within a school becomes aware of the sudden death of a student, be it homicide, suicide, accidental death, or the death of a student following an illness, it should be the responsibility of that individual to immediately call the principal and inform him/her of all the known facts regarding the death. It is important that the principal verify the facts concerning the death; including who has died. (There have, in some instances, been inaccurate accounts of who actually was deceased.) The principal needs to quickly assess the impact this death will have on the school community (i.e., closest friends, what extracurricular activities did he/she participate in, etc.) The principal will then take the lead in the activation of the protocol and the process through which students will be notified about the death. If the death occurs outside of school hours, the principal should call members of the **Crisis Management Team**. The building principal should also inform the Diocesan Superintendent and Catholic Schools office so news may be shared with other schools asking for prayers of support. The team members notify the entire staff that there will be a change in the procedure of the normal school day and requests them to come to school early the following morning. If additional help is needed, the principal should arrange to notify the appropriate people. If the principal is not available, the associate principal or the principal's designee will begin this process.

A phone calling tree or alert system should be established each school year in order that school staff may be notified of school-related emergencies in a timely manner.

## *Pre-Planning Phase*

### Step One

Appoint members to a building Crisis Management Team (typically include counselors, nurse, other building administrators, school social worker, school psychologist, educational consultant, etc.).

### Step Two

Organize calling tree or alert system.

### Step Three

Hold twenty-to-thirty minute staff meeting to review protocol procedures (this needs to be done annually).

## *Protocol Implementation*

### Step One

When notified of adult or student death, verify the death with appropriate public officials (if notification was not by family member or public official). Instances have occurred where the notification of who died was incorrect.

### Step Two

Notify the school Crisis Team Leader and assess the expected degree of response from the school community. Factors include groups that the deceased was involved in, close friends, etc.

### Step Three

If death was not during school hours, activate the pre-arranged calling tree or alert system to notify staff of early-morning mandatory meeting. Request that Crisis Management Team members meet with principal thirty minutes prior to staff meeting.

## Step Four

Designate the Crisis Management Team Leader as the person responsible for orchestrating the emotional first aid activities for the next few days. This person will serve as the "hub" of information and will direct the team's daily activities. (Typically, school counselor, if available)

## Step Five

After consulting with family of the deceased student, direct a staff member to immediately remove contents from his or her locker. Hopefully, this can be accomplished discreetly and prior to students returning to school. The personal contents belong to the parents and removal to the principal's office will ensure they are properly presented to the parents.

## Step Six

Direct a staff member to pull the deceased student's cumulative folder to determine what other schools the deceased student might have attended. The principal should call the other schools and inform them of the events that have occurred, particularly, if younger siblings are in those other schools. Secondly, the principal should notify the central administration office of the circumstances of the day. It is also helpful, at this point, to assign responsibility to someone to pull the student's name off any mailing lists that would be sent from the school and central administration office.

## Step Seven

Identify a support center area in the building where students may come for support and counseling. This area should be close to the guidance office and/or the main office to facilitate communication between guidance and administrative staff.

## Step Eight

Prepare an announcement to be read to the students. (*At the elementary level, it is often best to have the classroom teacher make the announcement.*) Do not announce the death of a student until it has been verified by reliable sources (i.e., police department, hospital, parents, etc.)

Note: It is important to have a central spokesperson, usually the principal, for all announcements to students. By the time students reach school following the death of a peer, they will have heard many different versions about what happened. The presence of a strong, caring, and supportive authority figure (i.e., the principal) sharing information during this stressful time is important. (*In elementary schools, it is equally important for*

*the classroom teacher to be a strong, caring, and supportive presence since the teacher will be looked upon by the students to provide stability during this crisis period.)*

One example of an announcement is the following:

*Students, may I have your attention, please. Last night (student's name) from our junior class died. This morning the faculty met to develop a plan to help all of us cope with this sad event. There will be special support assistance available for any student who feels they need this service. Today, counselors will be available in (given location) all day. Pause. I would like all of us to reflect for a minute in memory of (student's first name). Pause. Thank you for your attention.*

## **Step Nine**

Direct a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information and to prepare details for student/faculty attendance at the visitation and funeral. When details are final, an announcement can be made to staff and students.

Note: It is important to have faculty members present during the entire visitation period to assist the funeral home staff in handling children and teens. (Please refer to the Appendix regarding funeral and visitation.)

Designate one secretary who will know how to reach the principal throughout the day, so the principal can respond to any emergencies/administrative situations which may develop.

## **Step Ten**

Call and/or visit the parents as early as possible to express the schools' and your condolences. Visiting the parents is encouraged, and the principal should take along a staff member who has been well acquainted with the student. Ask the parents about pictures and other school related articles to be used for the student's funeral. Determine with the parents who will be the family contact for the school. Recognize this may be the first of several visits. *(The parents likely will be in a state of shock. If the death was by suspected suicide, the parents may not acknowledge or be in agreement with the coroner's finding which they have a legal right to challenge.)*

Contact the clergy who will be conducting the funeral to determine what role, if any, students or faculty should play, and to learn what religious traditions will be involved. (See Appendix)

## **Step Eleven**

Prepare a letter to be sent to all parents regarding the death of a school community member (Please see Appendix for sample letters.)

## **Step Twelve**

Arrange fifteen-minute after-school meeting with entire school staff. Review day's activities and seek names of any student faculty thinks needs additional emotional support. After meeting with faculty, meet with Crisis **Management Team**. Review day's activities and plan for the next day.

## **Step Thirteen**

On the second or third day following the deceased student's funeral, begin to bring closure by encouraging teachers to resume regular classroom activities as quickly as is appropriate.

## **Step Fourteen**

On the day following the funeral, the principal should make the following closure statement to all students and faculty: (This is done the day following the funeral because many of the deceased student's closest friends will not return to school the day of the funeral.)

*May I have your attention, please? I wish to thank all of the students and faculty for the support you have shown each other during the past few days. The example you have shown is a positive and healthy one and provides us the opportunity to work toward strengthening our relationships with each other. Guidance staff remain available if you should wish to talk with a counselor. (Any additional comments from the family that have been passed on to the principal might be shared at this point.) In elementary schools the classroom teachers may be the ones to deliver the messages of thanks to the students for the support they have given to each other.*

## ***Post Implementation Follow-up***

### **Step One**

Within two weeks following the funeral, meet with the **Crisis Management Team** and debrief actions taken. Two key questions are addressed: What worked well in dealing with this event, and what could be improved?

### **Step Two**

Modify the building protocol based upon feedback of crisis management team and others.

Provide changes in the protocol to any district level planning group.

# Principal's "Check" List

Met with Crisis **Management Team**.

Designated the **Crisis Management Team Leader**.

Arranged for substitute to assist student's classroom teacher.

Instructed a staff member to remove locker contents from deceased student's locker.

Designated a counseling support center in building.

Met with building staff.

Directed staff member to review student's cumulative folder and notify other school principals as needed.

Informed students regarding the death.

Wrote letter to parents of all students regarding the death.

Designated a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information.

Informed students/staff regarding funeral arrangements.

Directed a staff member to remove student's name from all mailing lists, including the district's central office.

Called and/or visited parents.

Held mid-day meeting with **Crisis Management Team Leader** to assess response activities.

Contacted clergy who will be conducting funeral services.

Held after-school meeting.

Met with **Crisis Management Team** at end of day to review day's activities, review list of "high-risk" students, and plan for next day's activities.

# Role of The Crisis Management Team and Principal

## Mandatory All-Staff Meeting

Prior to the commencement of school following the death of a student, the principal should have an all-staff meeting. Generally, the principal will take fifteen minutes to meet with staff. In addition to the "before school" meeting, it is important to hold an "after school" meeting to discuss the day's events and to talk about any students the faculty has concerns about.

### Step One

The principal will announce an immediate mandatory all-staff meeting. Hopefully, the staff will know of the meeting through telephone-tree notification.

### Step Two

The principal identifies the **Crisis Management Team Leader** and informs staff this person will assist the principal in directing staff activities.

### Step Three

The principal and the **Crisis Management Team Leader** inform teachers and non-certified staff what is expected of them and review the accompanying hand-out materials. (See Appendix) All confirmed public facts regarding the student should be shared with the staff. *(If death was by suicide, staff should be prepared to reinforce the concept that suicide is a very permanent way to deal with life's temporary problems.)*

Request that any staff member who, for whatever reason, does not believe he/she can discuss this topic with the class, inform the principal. The principal then needs to assign a **Crisis Team** member to the classroom. [In many instances, the teacher(s) closest to the student will automatically need a substitute for the day. The substitute is there to assist the

teacher so the regular teacher can spend individual time consoling students, going with the principal to visit parents, etc. This is an especially important issue at the elementary level.]

#### **Step Four**

Inform staff what announcement will be made to the students and when the announcement will be made. (If possible, provide the teachers with a typed copy of the announcement.)

#### **Step Five**

Inform all staff members that any media presence or requests for information should be immediately directed to the principal. (See Appendix)

#### **Step Six**

Announce that a brief faculty meeting will be held after school to review the day's events. This allows an opportunity to receive feedback from faculty, to answer questions, and to review the next day's expectations. *(At this meeting, be sure to get the names of any other students the staff members feel are "high risk".)*

#### **Step Seven**

Entertain questions from the staff and/or requests staff have at this time.

# **Crisis Management Team Leader's "Check" List**

List the teachers and staff who will need extra support because of their relationship, etc. to the deceased.

Assigned staff member to classroom where assistance by the teacher has been requested.

Maintained a list of "high risk" students.

Organized the building's counseling efforts including grief group(s).

Assisted in identifying students who were absent and "high risk".

Recommended to the principal students who (A) needed to go home or (B) needed additional community mental health resources.

Reviewed with team all students on "high risk" list and assigned staff member as a case manager.

Assisted in organizing staffs' role in funeral arrangements, including visitation.

Met with **Crisis Management Team** at end of day to update and plan for next day's activities.

# **Role of Non-Certified Staff**

All building personnel are affected by the death of a student. Therefore, it is important to inform non-certified staff of their role in dealing with this event.

## **Step One**

All non-certified staff should attend the mandatory staff meeting to be informed of the plans for the day. Assistance should be offered to staff members who knew the student and are affected by his/her death.

## **Step Two**

Secretarial staff should review procedures for handling requests or calls from parents, news media, and others. Secretarial staff need to remove the student's name from mailing lists. The staff need to notify the principal as soon as possible regarding students who are not in attendance. The principal then should discuss with the Crisis Team Leader appropriate actions to follow concerning any students who might be high risk and are not in attendance at school.

## **Step Three**

The guidance secretary should free guidance staff schedules for the day. Some counselors may direct the secretary to clear their schedules for several days, so they can best respond to this situation.

## **Step Four**

Non-certified support staff should give the names of any students they are concerned about to the Crisis Management Team Leader.

## **Step Five**

Non-certified staff need to attend the mandatory after-school meeting.

# Teacher's Role

Teachers play a vital role in helping students deal with their feelings regarding the death of a fellow student, a parent, or any significant person in the student's life. Teachers should review information in the Appendix of this manual as soon as they are notified of a death. It is important for teachers to determine if they can teach their class this particular day or will need help to "cover" their class (es) so they have individual time to console distraught students, visit parents with the building principal, etc. Sometimes teachers are also extremely distraught over the death. In these instances, the teacher should request assistance to cover their classes. It is okay for teachers to grieve and seek help with their assigned duties.

## Step One

Attend all-staff mandatory meetings and review any available written information. (See Appendix.)

## Step Two

Allow the expressions of grief. Acknowledge and encourage students to express their feelings of loss, anger, sadness, etc.

Note: People have different reactions to grief. One way for the teacher to encourage the students' expression of grief is to acknowledge your own feelings immediately following the announcement of the student's death. If you are uncomfortable discussing grief or handling this situation in your classroom today, please ask for assistance from the Crisis Management Team Leader.

## Step Three: *Death by Natural Causes, Accident, etc.*

If the death was a sudden one following an accident or one following a long-term illness, it may be important to have the students discuss their fears and to talk a bit about funerals. This may be a time when students ask questions. Questions need to be answered honestly but tactfully and simply. The major focus should be on assisting students in expressing their feelings and reactions. (Students will respond differently based upon their past experience with death, coping skills, and age. Please see Appendix.)

#### Step Four: *Death by Suicide*

If death was by suicide, emphasize this tragedy as an error in judgment. Suicide is a permanent solution to temporary problems. Encourage students to talk about ways to cope with stress, loss, and personal problems.

#### Step Five

Channel names and/or students themselves to the guidance office if they seem high risk now or as the week progresses. (See Appendix) *(At the elementary level, much of the crisis intervention will take place in the student's classroom because it is the location students feel most secure.)*

#### Step Six

Attend a brief after-school meeting to review the day's events. The principal and Crisis Management Team members will be available to discuss concerns you may have regarding any of your students. It should be noted that teachers need to be taken care of, too. Take breaks and have time away from students during the day. Be sure to eat meals and watch personal nutrition and other health habits. After the students have left the building, give yourself an opportunity to process what has happened during the day.

#### Step Seven

Attend the mandatory all-staff after-school meeting.

# Teacher's "Check" List

Attended the all-staff a.m. meeting.

If needed, requested a substitute to assist so that I could have individual time to console students, visit with deceased student's parents, etc.

Modeled the classroom discussion by sharing with students my feelings and reactions.

(or)

I felt I could not lead class discussion and informed the principal or **Crisis Management Team Leader** and requested a team member to lead the discussion.

Allowed students to go to counseling support center (sent peer or aide to accompany them.)

Kept list of students(s) I thought were "high risk" and gave names to **Crisis Management Team Leader** during and at the end of the day.

Offered colleagues, who were in need of help, any assistance I could give them.

Attended after-school staff meeting.

If appropriate, attended the visitation and/or funeral.

# Guidance and Support Staff Roles

The guidance and support staff (school social worker, school psychologist, educational consultant, etc.) should take the responsibility of gathering information about students/staff reaction to the death and facilitate individual and/or grief group support sessions.

## Step One

Attend the a.m. staff meeting.

## Step Two

- A. As members of the **Crisis Management Team**, identify and have contact with school staff acquainted with the deceased student and possibly in need of extra support (e.g., a teacher who has had a special relationship with the student, had the student in class, or has a sibling in class.)
- B. Provide "in-class" assistance when requested by teachers.

## Step Three

Start a master list of "high-risk" students in need of extra support. These include: close friends of the deceased student, relatives, students in the same activities or clubs as the deceased student, neighbors of the deceased student, and students with other stressors. (See Appendix for other indicators of students who may be "high risk".)

## Step Four

Guidance and A.E.A. staff should meet briefly with all identified "high-risk" students and with any students who are referred. Decide what, if any, intervention is appropriate (triage). Options could include:

- A. Individual grief counseling.
- B. Grief group. The grief group should automatically be formed the first day, and students should stream in and out during the day. The focus is on memories of the deceased student and grief work. Typically, students will be in grief group for only one or two periods and not all day. For students requiring "excessive" intervention, parents need to be informed and directed to appropriate community resources.
- C. Referral to community mental health center or other appropriate community resource.

## **Step Five**

Identify students who are absent during the day who may be "high risk," and inform parents of your concern for them. This may include non-school attendees and those students who may have dropped out or transferred.

## **Step Six**

For students who request to leave school because of their grief reaction:

- A. Release students to parents or an adult designated by the parent. Encourage the parent not to leave the child alone during the day.
- B. Provide parents with guidelines on how to manage grief and a brief listing of community resources. (See Appendix.)
- C. Let the student know that you hope to see him/her to return to school the next day.
- D. Check to see if the students return the next day and briefly check with them to see how they are doing. If a student has not returned, contact their parents to check to see how he/she is doing. Offer your assistance to the parents and/or student.

## **Step Seven**

Attend the after-school staff meeting.

## **Step Eight**

At the end of the first day, the **Crisis Management Team** should meet to update themselves and review the list of "high-risk" students. Throughout the week, review the status of "high risk" students with the master list. Determine which students may need to be referred to community mental health services based on their previous history and immediate need.

## **Step Nine**

Discuss the role the guidance/A.E.A. staff will provide in the funeral or memorial service (See Appendix). After the funeral, assist the building staff in moving toward a "normal" atmosphere as soon as possible. (An announcement will be made by the principal regarding continued availability of guidance staff.)

## **Step Ten**

Carefully review with the principal and other **Crisis Management Team** members the memorial requests for the deceased student (See Appendix).

## **Step Eleven**

In a week or two following the crisis, meet as a team and discuss the response activities including those procedures which may need to be modified.

# Teacher's Role

## Elementary and Secondary

*Following the death of a student, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. This brief handout is intended to provide a guide for your use in assisting the students in your classes through the next few days and weeks as they resolve their feelings related to this death.*

Normal grief is generally characterized by progression from an initial state of shock and denial, to one of anger, to one of disorganization and despair, and finally to a state of acceptance and hope.

For many of your students, this may be their first encounter with death. They will look to you for guidance and modeling. To share with the students your own feelings when you are told of the death--your shock, your sadness, your confusion--is valuable. To reminisce about your relationship with the deceased student, if you know him/her is important. Share with students what you will remember about him/her.

Let students know their feelings are normal. Encourage the students to be supportive of one another and to escort any friend who is upset to a teacher or the guidance office. Reassure them that the adults in the building are available to help. Also, encourage the students to discuss their feelings with their parents.

The most important thing teachers can do is to allow some opportunity for students to express feelings related to the death. Help them through the grief process by acknowledging the pain and grief they are experiencing, by being a good, active listener, and by reassuring them that their feelings are normal and expected.

# Parent Communications

# Parent Communications

Parents will want information when a death has occurred in the school. Depending on the nature of the emergency, the entire community may be affected. By issuing press/media statements you will meet some of the community's need for information, however, special communications to parents may be extremely helpful in gaining their support for the school and in reaching satisfactory closure to the crisis.

## **Parent Communications by Phone:**

- Use active listening skills to calm an upset parent.
- Contact the parents of any student who has had a difficult time coping with the death and give suggestions on how to offer support at home plus information on community mental health resources.
- Reassure parents that the school is responding to the emergency and describe the response activity.

## **Guidelines for Written Communication to the Parents:**

Depending on the impact of the death, a letter may be sent home with every student in the class or classes involved and in some cases with the entire school. This letter could include the following information:

- Information about the death that has occurred.
- What the children have been told.
- Grief reactions that the parents might expect to see in their children.
- How to respond to their children.
- Resources available to the parents.
- Steps the school is taking to cope with the situation.

## **Guidelines for Parent Meetings:**

The general experience of school personnel holding large group or assembly meetings for parents has been that these meetings tend to add contagion to the crises rather than to minimize the impact for the community. The recommendations for parent meetings are for small group meetings to be held off school premises, if possible, perhaps in neighborhood centers. Some schools have successfully conducted parent meetings by assigning small groups to classrooms and arranging for two facilitators for each group. If a meeting is held off campus, staff should attend the meetings to reassure parents that the school is responding to the emergency. Any parent meeting should be conducted during after-school hours.

An alternative to group meetings may be to offer parents drop-in counseling during after-school hours. This arrangement should be offered for no more than one school week.

# Sample Letter to Parents

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of John Doe, a sophomore in our school. John died from injuries suffered in a car accident which occurred last evening (do not specify reason if death by suicide or causes which are unknown, etc.).

The funeral will be held at (Funeral Home or Church) at \_\_\_\_\_ a.m./p.m. Visitation will be held at (Funeral Home) during the hours of \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_.

Parents are encouraged to attend the funeral with their child. (Note: Send a letter home to parents even if you do not know the details of the funeral arrangements.)

Students will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. Any reaction is normal in the grief process and can range from withdrawal, to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of Joe.

Special counseling services have been made available to students today and will continue to be available throughout the week and longer, if needed.

If you think your child needs additional counseling support, please do not hesitate to contact the \_\_\_\_\_ (School Counseling Office) at (phone number).

Sincerely,

Principal and Staff

# Parent Referrals for Counseling

What should parents watch for in terms of referring their child for counseling?

Some indicators of children who might need counseling include the following:

- Children who have experienced another recent loss.
- A child who has made suicide attempts or who makes suicidal statements.
- A child who had a close relationship with the deceased student but pretends that absolutely nothing has happened and continues to do so for an extended period of time.
- A student's schoolwork takes a dramatic decline, or the youngster develops a phobic fear of school.
- A child's behavior changes significantly over a long period of time.
- A child demonstrates continual preoccupation with death.

# Memorials and Guidelines Regarding the Funeral

# **Funeral Service and Memorials**

## **Guidelines Regarding the Funeral**

During the contacts the principal and Crisis Management Team members have with the family to offer support and assistance, the family's wishes about funeral services will be explored. Let the family know that staff and students will want to attend the funeral but be sensitive to any family preferences for a closed service. Offer to make announcements of funeral arrangements at school. Ideally, these announcements should be made in small groups. Decisions about school response to the funeral will depend on a variety of factors including the funeral arrangements, the impact of the death on the school, the circumstances surrounding the death, etc. Parents should always be encouraged to accompany their children to the funeral, especially in the elementary grades.

The most accepted practice for funeral attendance has been to excuse students to attend the funeral only if they have parental permission. The deceased's family may be receptive to scheduling services after school hours so that more people could attend. If district buses are available to transport students, parents must provide written permission for their child to ride the bus. Staff should be available both at the funeral and at the building to assist distraught persons.

In the case of a suicidal death, it is preferred to hold funeral services in the church due to the sensitivity of the situation and those involved. If requests to hold services at the school building occur, it is best to consult with your pastor for guidance. Students may be excused with parental permission. Continue to stress the fact that suicide is a permanent response to temporary problems. Crisis Management Team members and other support persons should attend the funeral/burial to help any unattended or high-risk persons. If the funeral is during school hours, some team members need to remain in the building to help those students unable to attend.

If the family chooses to have a closed service, this decision may have its own ramifications since the funeral is a way for people to say "good-bye" to the deceased. The family may agree to a memorial service for the deceased. Such a service should be held after school hours and off school premises, if possible, although the school may be an appropriate site for the service, i.e., accidental death of an administrator. It may also be appropriate for the school to host a memorial service in the event of multiple accidental deaths of students/faculty.

# Guidelines for Memorials

Gifts and memorials are a mechanism for people to recover from the loss of a death. A small gesture can mitigate feelings of helplessness and communicate the concern of the school. Suggestions for memorials include books for the library, planting a tree, making a quilt, founding a scholarship, etc.

When a person has died by suicide, the issue of memorials is complicated by the need to prevent romanticizing or glamorizing the death. It is recommended that any activity chosen be a one-time event. Memorials for suicides might be donations of blood to the Red Cross, contributions to a suicide prevention program, etc.

- Stages of Grief
- Developmental Stages and Grief
- How to Comfort Those Who Grieve
- How to Converse with Grieving People
- Grief Support Group Suggestions
- Factors Indicating High Risk for Complicated Grief
- Understanding Post Traumatic Stress

# Stages of Grief

Following the death of a student, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. Although grief is usually described in a series of stages, not everyone touched by the death goes through the stages of grief in the order they are listed below, and not every person goes through every stage. In addition, some people may return to stages an observer may think that person has already passed through earlier.

1. Denial: Denial may be mixed with shock or disbelief that the event has actually occurred. Students may spend time confirming the facts with fellow students, hoping to discover that there has been some mistake in the reporting.
2. Anger: As the reality of the loss sinks in, there may be blaming of other people for the event having happened. Or there may be anger at unrelated people and events, a need to rant and rave and be critical.
3. Bargaining: This may be associated with feelings of guilt, where a student wishes to undo earlier interactions with the one who has died, or even make promises that if this event can be undone, the survivor will be a better, different person.
4. Depression: Although survivors have other people for support, they may still feel very much alone and sad.
5. Acceptance: This is the culmination of successful grieving when survivors come to grips with the reality of the death.

**S**  
**H**  
**O**  
**C**  
**K**

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance

# Developmental Stages of Understanding Death and Grieving

## Infancy:

When a member of the family dies, an infant may receive less physical/loving care as a result of the caregiver's grieving. The infant may react to this situation in a physical manner with increases of crying and not being able to be easily soothed, developing slight skin rashes or clinging to caregivers. Generally, these behaviors are temporary and will diminish as caregivers are again able to focus normal attention to the infant.

Grieving caregivers can be advised to:

- Spend some time each day in a nurturing, soothing manner with the infant.
- Keep the infant's routine as consistent as possible.
- Let other nurturing family members help with caregiving.
- Allow others to help with household tasks.

## Pre-School Age: (Two and one half to five years)

Pre-schoolers do not understand death is permanent. They view it as reversible and temporary. Death may be confused with sleeping or the person merely being absent, with the belief the person will return. Since children are egocentric, death may be perceived as punishment for wrongdoing or caused because the child had previously wished the person dead. Sometimes, death is thought of as violent. Children also sometimes think they might catch the condition which caused the death.

Pre-schoolers may exhibit these possible behaviors upon the death of a parent, peer, or other loved one:

- May show little concern at times.
- Bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, fear of the dark.
- Fear of separating from significant others.
- May need to talk about death a lot. These repetitions make it real for the child, and he/she may say things, such as, "Ben can't use his dump truck anymore because he's dead."

Adults can do the following to help a pre-school child cope with death:

- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving.
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen.
- Encourage all adults in the school to use terms "dead/death" and not phrases of "passed away", "sleeping", "resting", or "taken from us".

- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities, and schedules. Keep explanations short, simple, and truthful. The explanations may need to be frequently repeated.

### School Age:

From five to nine years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for them.

Between nine to eleven years, the child will perceive death as including them. Death is becoming more real, final, universal, and inevitable. The child may show interest in biological aspects of death and want to know details of the funeral.

Adolescents will frequently have encountered several situations of loss in addition to death. These losses may include separation from friends, separation and/or divorce of parents, etc. Often deaths of friends, relatives, or acquaintances will trigger feelings of unresolved grief. Adolescents frequently respond to death very intensely. Developmentally, the adolescent is searching for explanations regarding all aspects of life which includes death. Many "why" questions are asked which often cannot be adequately answered by adults. School-age children and adolescents may show these behaviors:

- crying and/or sobbing
- anxiety
- headaches
- abdominal pain
- denial of death
- hostile reaction toward deceased
- guilt
- failure to complete homework
- poor grades
- lack of attention and concentration
- loss of manual skills
- fear of continuing friendship bonds: might lose another friend

Adults can help school-age children and adolescents by:

- Providing information for the questions asked.
- Physically and verbally comforting students - acknowledgment of their pain.
- Flexing the student's schedule as needed.
- Referral to appropriate counseling resources.
- Admitting that adults do not always know why certain events happen.

# How to Comfort Those Who Grieve (Child)

- 1. Infancy:** Spend time with the child walking, reading, and talking. Spend some time with them away from the group.
- 2. Listen:** Be sure to have good eye contact. Use simple, direct words. Let them be mad or express other feelings.
- 3. Explain Things:** Give information about what's going to happen. Keep any Promises made. Be as predictable as possible.

# How to Comfort Those Who Grieve (Adult)

1. Be There: Attend the funeral, visit, call, and spend time with those grieving. Particularly after the initial attention subsides, bring food, do errands.
2. Listen: Grieving people need to talk about this sudden vacuum in their lives. Allow them to know what you wish to hear about their experiences. *"I'd like to be here with you for a while if you'd like to talk." "It's hard to believe that he's gone, isn't it?"*
3. Send a Note: Notes can share personal memories, short and simple.  
  
"I'm thinking of you during these painful days".  
"I am praying for you during this time".
4. Give a Gift: A collection of poems. A book to the library in memory of the deceased. A donation to a related charity.
5. Extend an Invitation: Consider what the person likes to do. Eat out? Go to a play? Take a drive? Bereaved people often decline invitations or cancel at the last minute. Don't give up. Ask again. Don't forget the person after time has passed.

# How to Converse with Grieving People

Friends, relatives, and neighbors are usually supportive at the time of a death and during the wake and funeral that follows. Food, flowers, and physical presence are among the thoughtful expressions. But after the funeral, many grieving people wonder where their friends are. In some ways they need support and caring from their friends even more when the reality hits and the long process of grief begins. Ways of helping grieving people are as limitless as your imagination.

Some suggestions are:

- Try to understand the grief process rather than be annoyed by it.
- "I'm sorry" or "I care" is all that is necessary to say.
- Don't say: "You will get over it in time." They will never stop missing the person who died. Time may soften the hurt, but it will not just go away. There will always be a scar.
- Listen, listen, listen. Talking about the pain slowly lessens its sting. Most bereaved persons need to talk. It is helpful for someone to listen. Try to become an effective listener.
- Encourage expressions of specific feelings: anger, guilt, frustration, confusion, depression, hate.
- Be patient. Mourning takes time. People need you. Stand by them for as long as possible. There is no timetable for grief. Do not give a pep talk or suggest a timetable.
- Talk about the good memories. They help the healing process.
- Suggest that grieving people take part in support groups. Sharing similar experiences helps healing.
- Be there caring, saying "I'm sorry" and helping in practical ways.
- Sincerely ask, "How are you doing?" Bereaved persons can tell if you want to hear "fine" or if you really want to know.
- Help bereaved to eliminate expectations as to how they should feel and when they will be healed.
- Be approachable, aware, and interested.
- Be accepting of the person, of his/her feelings, his/her confusion.
- Acts of thoughtfulness—a note, visit, plant, helpful book, plate of cookies, phone call, invitation to lunch or to go shopping, or have coffee.
- **Be confidential with** what is shared with you

# Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress

Under limited circumstances, some students may experience post-traumatic stress as a result of a traumatic event. Post-traumatic stress is a condition which is precipitated by an event beyond the range of typical experience. A student who has, for example, suffered repeated losses in their life may experience post-traumatic stress upon the death of a friend. Also, students may experience post-traumatic stress if a catastrophe has occurred at school (i.e., shooting of teacher or students, natural disasters, etc.) Symptoms of post-traumatic stress include:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event.
- Avoidance of stimuli the person associates with the traumatic event.
- Numbing of general responsiveness.
- Pattern of distressful behavior which lasts longer than one month.

As with any severe anxiety, the helper can assist by:

- Providing a safe and supportive environment.
- Reassuring the person that the reaction is a natural occurrence to the event.
- Helping the person discharge "pent-up" pain.

Often times, counseling groups provide the most support for the individual, particularly teenagers. The ideal group size is from six-to-eight members. The group sessions should be times limited with the purpose of providing mutual support and understanding as each group member deals with their reactions to the traumatic event.

# Coping with a Suicidal Death

The nature of a death by suicide is much different than one by natural causes or an accident. For instance, in suicidal death, many "why" questions are asked which have no rational or medical explanation. For example, friends and relatives often ask, "Why did the person kill himself/herself?" and "Why didn't he/she come to me for help?" In suicide, **survivors** often experience a great sense of guilt and anger. Guilt because they feel they should have been able to help the person, and anger over the fact the suicidal person would abandon them in such a tragic and untimely manner.

It is important in dealing with a suicidal death to be prudent in your responses:

- Do not glorify the act of suicide. Stress to the students that suicide is an error in judgment and is a "**permanent solution to life's temporary problems.**"
- Do not announce that the death was by suicide when making general public statements. Coroner's medical findings can be legally contested and frequently are in cases of suicide. School personnel should allow the discussion of suicide as the students talk about the death, however, it is not essential that school personnel confirm the death was by suicide. As the students are discussing the nature of the death (which they will do), school personnel should take the opportunity to discuss the subject of suicide and how the students might cope with stress, personal frustration, disappointment, and other severe hardships.
- Recognize the tragedy of the event and acknowledge the varied feelings of those grieving.
- Memorials should be directed toward symbols of coping and living (e.g., planting of a tree, donations to a crisis hotline, a blood drive).
- A return to "normal" school functioning should be encouraged as soon as possible, so as to regain a sense of stability and purpose in the lives of those grieving.

# Grief Response / Crisis Team Resources

## NWAEA staff resources

**Northwest AEA Crisis Response  
Team Coordinator**

[Jerome Schaefer](#)

[jschaefer@nwaea.org](mailto:jschaefer@nwaea.org)

712-222-6114, 800-352-9040 (6114)

cell: 712-899-4145

**Northwest AEA Crisis Response  
Team Leader**

[Molly Twohig](#)

[mtwohig@nwaea.org](mailto:mtwohig@nwaea.org)

712-222-6345, 800-352-9040 (6345)

**Northwest AEA Crisis Response  
Team Leader**

[Dana Oas](#)

[doas@nwaea.org](mailto:doas@nwaea.org)

712-722-4378, 800/572-5073 (4378)

## PLAEA staff resources

**Prairie Lakes AEA  
School Social Worker**

[Joan Hansen](#)

[jhansen@plaea.org](mailto:jhansen@plaea.org)

712-458-7021, 866/540-3858 (87021)

## Heartland AEA staff resources

**Heartland AEA  
Regional Directors**

**Kuemper - TJ Jumper**

[tjumper@heartlandaea.org](mailto:tjumper@heartlandaea.org)

**Boone - JoAnne Klocke**

[jklocke@heartlandaea.org](mailto:jklocke@heartlandaea.org)

## Print resources

<https://sites.google.com/a/nwaea.org/northwest-aea-crisis-response/home>

Click on Toolkit for resources

Adapted from Mississippi Bend AEA School Crisis Manual

# Appendix

## PRAYER FOR THE DEATH OF A FRIEND

Blessed are You, Lord our God,  
who are the Keeper of the Book of Life.  
As we gather today in remembrance of \_\_\_\_\_  
we know, Lord, that we all must die,  
and that You alone keep the dates of our death  
within Your Book of Life,  
but we still share the shock of death.  
That news carried with it the shadow of fear,  
for it is a reminder that, someday, we too shall die.  
Today, we pray for \_\_\_\_\_ who has passed  
through the doorway of death,  
and we pray for ourselves as well.

We remember in our prayers  
the members of \_\_\_\_\_'s family  
who surely are lost in sorrow at this time.  
Support them with Your Holy Spirit  
and grant them the courage to embrace this tragic mystery  
as part of the Plan of Life.

Lord, may the news of this death  
be for us a holy message  
of how not to waste our todays,  
how not to be unprepared for the arrival of death  
In our own lives.  
May we best remember \_\_\_\_\_  
by being grateful for life today  
and by loving You, our  
God,  
with all our hearts, all our strength and all our minds.

Eternal Rest grant unto \_\_\_\_\_ and  
Perpetual Light shine upon him/her.  
May \_\_\_\_\_'s soul and all the souls of the faithfully departed  
rest in peace.  
Amen.

## FIRST DAY SAMPLE AFTER DEATH/SUICIDE

First hour classes: teachers follow this written procedure

- A. Prayer
- B. Announce death of person/explain using accurate facts to the best of our knowledge at that time. This is to be done by a teacher in each class, not via all school P.A. system.
- C. Let students know that announcements will be made in regard to funeral. Students will be excused from classes to attend if they have written permission from parents(s)/guardian(s) concerning funeral arrangements. No student will be allowed to leave school that day without adult accompaniment and parent permission.
- D. Open up discussion with students. Let them know it is normal and OK to feel upset.
- E. Announce to students: There will be adults/peer helpers available to them for counseling/talking/listening. Try to find out the name of students who express interest in counseling during the day.
- F. Guidelines for those needing assistance will be presented at this time. At NO time should students be allowed to go for assistance unaccompanied by an adult or peer.
- G. Continue with classes the remainder of the school day. Allow for future discussion time if teacher feels comfortable and the need arises.

First Hour Class Discussion: It is recommended that a crisis team member be in each first class if possible. Be aware of students who look upset but are not talking. Staff should make individual contact with those students as quickly as possible because they may have knowledge and/or feelings that they are not comfortable sharing in a group. In particular, any student who had prior knowledge of the impending suicide and took no preventative actions should be dealt with individually by the crisis team so the student will not be found out and blamed for the death. It is strongly recommended that a SAT member follow the schedule of the person who has died for the day.

It should be expected that during the discussion time other counseling issues may surface with individual students, for example, other ungrieved losses or other stresses that suddenly seem overwhelming. These students may need to be referred, too. Some direct teaching about normal grieving should be done.

During this first hour class period, after the students have been notified of the facts concerning the death, there will be some verbal discussion. This may be conducted by either a crisis team member or by the teacher with the following considerations:

1. The range of normal feelings and expressions of grief and loss should be anticipated, accepted and dealt with in an appropriate way.
2. Supportive listening skills on the part of the teacher/crisis team member are most important.
3. Discussion should be open and frank, but shift pretty quickly away from the topic of suicide and onto depressions, feeling of loss/grief, and appropriate productive ways to deal with problems in our lives. It is very important that something positive is forged out of this event, rather than just extend lamentation.

During this discussion time it is appropriate to answer questions about funerals or death in general. This should reduce fears the students may have, especially for those students who have never been to a funeral.

### **SAMPLE PRIMARY GRADE ANNOUNCEMENT (GRADES PK-2)**

We have learned that \_\_\_\_\_ has passed away/died.

This is a really sad time for everybody. We are sad for \_\_\_\_\_ and his/her family and we are sad for ourselves because we will miss \_\_\_\_\_.

Today we have a lot of people in our school to listen to our questions and listen to our feelings.

If you would like to have someone like, (school counselor's name) to talk to any time today, just let me know.

### **SAMPLE UPPER GRADE ANNOUNCEMENT (GRADES 3-5)**

We have learned that \_\_\_\_\_ has passed away/died.

We share in the grief of \_\_\_\_\_'s family and the loss all of you are feeling. Because of this loss we feel it is important for each of us to work through our grief. To help you work through your grief, we have the following people here to support you.

**(Review the persons and the procedures for teaching them.)**

If you feel the need to speak with someone or if you have questions, please let me know and you may speak with a counselor right away.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian,

Over the next several days your son or daughter will have the opportunity to process his/her feelings regarding the recent death of \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ School. It is important to let your child know that any feeling he or she is experiencing is acceptable and normal. You may also wish to openly share your own feelings about this experience.

Children need our help to make it through this experience. If there are any questions you may have, please let us know and we will try to assist you as best we are able.

The \_\_\_\_\_ Church will celebrate the promised resurrection with \_\_\_\_\_ and his/her family in liturgy on day, date at time.

Since your son/daughter may have known \_\_\_\_\_ and may wish to attend the funeral, the following guidelines will be followed:

1. Students interested in attending the funeral mass must be accompanied by an adult (preferably parent/guardian).
2. Verbal or written permission must be received in the school office by day, date and time and must include the name of the accompanying adult.
3. After time on date, the accompanying adult must come to the school office in the building where your child is attending morning classes in order to pick him/her up.

Sincerely,

School principal

-----  
Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Home School \_\_\_\_\_

has permission to attend the funeral of \_\_\_\_\_ on day, date, at time.

Adult accompanying student is \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

PERMISSION FORM

## GUIDELINES FOR FUNERAL/WAKE VISITATIONS

1. A child's participation in a wake or funeral may be helpful to them in bringing a sense of closure to the event.
2. Have at least one family discussion about the death prior to attending a wake or funeral.
3. Feel free to suggest to the child that attending may be helpful to them and supportive of others.
4. Explain that the funeral is broken into several components:
  - a. the wake period
  - b. the funeral service
  - c. the graveside service
5. Explain what each component entails before the child participates.
6. Participation can last anywhere from a few minutes to the entire length of the component.
7. Attending services helps to bring closure and in the memory building part of the healing process.
8. Describe how the funeral home will be arranged, what to do when approaching the family members or the kneeler in front of the casket.
9. Tell them what open casket means if it is to be open; tell what closed casket means if it is to be closed.
10. Ask the child if they need more information.
11. Use a balanced approach to grief: not too much and not too little.
12. Let the child be involved in the choice about how much to participate.