



# Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for School Personnel



## Why are school personnel important for grieving children?

You play important roles in observing students, understanding how to create a supportive school environment, informing and collaborating with other staff when aware of a grieving student, and knowing when it is best to suggest referral to a professional.

### 1 How do children grieve?

Students of all ages grieve the death of an important person. Grieving students can show a range of emotions and reactions. Sometimes they appear sad and talk about missing the person. Other times they play, interact with friends, and do their usual activities. Most students, with time, recover and adjust to the death. Typically, they are able to participate in “tasks” considered helpful to the grieving process:

- Understanding the person cannot come back
- Coping with feelings about the person and the death
- Adjusting to changes in life without the person
- Talking about memories and what that person meant to them
- Committing to relationships with new people
- Continuing on a healthy developmental path

### 2 What is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

In Childhood Traumatic Grief, students have traumatic stress reactions to a death which interfere with their ability to accomplish the tasks of bereavement. When this happens, even happy thoughts and memories of the person remind a student of the traumatic way the person died. A younger student may be afraid to sleep alone at night because of nightmares about a shooting that she witnessed, while an older student may avoid playing on the school baseball team his father used to coach because it brings up painful thoughts about his father’s death in a terrible car accident. These students get “stuck” on the traumatic aspects of the death, and cannot process their grief successfully. When students with traumatic grief have scary thoughts, upsetting memories and negative feelings related to how the person died, they may also have

uncomfortable physical symptoms. To control and minimize the unpleasant feelings and reactions, they try to avoid the scary memories as well as talking or thinking about anything related to the person or way the person died. They may also avoid people, places, or things that trigger upsetting thoughts and feelings. These reactions and the fear of stirring up scary reminders make it difficult to remember positive things or talk about the person and what the person meant to them.

### 3 Who develops Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Most students recover and adjust to the death of a family member, friend, or other important person. But a smaller number will develop Childhood Traumatic Grief. Traumatic grief can occur following a death from sudden, unexpected causes such as from a homicide or suicide, mass shootings, disasters, accidents, or a sudden medical condition such as a heart attack. However, students can also develop symptoms even if death was due to natural causes, advanced age, or a terminal illness such as cancer, especially if the child was surprised or scared by the death or was exposed to complex or frightening medical procedures.

### 4 What are Traumatic Stress Reactions in Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Grief related traumatic stress reactions may include the following:

- Intrusive reactions such as upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, memories, or play about the frightening way the person died
- Physical or physiological distress such as headaches, stomachaches, symptoms mimicking the way the deceased died, jumpiness, trouble concentrating
- Avoidance reactions such as withdrawal; acting as if not upset about the death; or avoiding reminders of the person, the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to the death
- Negative mood or beliefs related to the traumatic death such as anger, guilt, shame, self-blame, loss of trust, believing the world is unsafe
- Increased arousal such as irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, dropping grades, increased vigilance, and fears about safety of oneself or others; self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, suicidality)

### 5 What are the signs a student might have Childhood Traumatic Grief?

Students with traumatic grief may look different at different developmental levels. However, there are some common signs and symptoms of traumatic grief that children may show. You may observe the following:

- ***Different reactions in students at different ages***  
Preschool and young children may engage in repeated play about the death, may have trouble getting back on track with a routine and are not easily comforted. School-aged students may be more preoccupied with details and show excessive worry, have bad dreams and show more typical trauma responses. Teens may reveal their distress by their drug or alcohol use, talk of self-harm, withdrawal and feeling different from peers.
- ***Being overly preoccupied with how the important person died***  
This preoccupation may take the form of repeated questions and/or descriptions of details of the death or come out of the blue unrelated to the setting or situation.
- ***Reliving or re-enacting the traumatic death through play and/or artwork***  
The student may re-enact the death or include themes of the event into his play, having the same tragic end or showing

aspects of the death in drawings. Their play and art may also portray inaccurate scenes or details. The student may also report nightmares or upsetting memories that interfere with participation and attention.

- ***Showing signs of emotional and/or behavioral distress when reminded of the loss***

Reminders may be difficult to predict and can range from seemingly insignificant events to more traumatic reminders. This stress reaction may be caused by physical reminders, or when thoughts are triggered by situations or things others say. Many regular school events (e.g., parent's night, class plays, etc.) or holidays and anniversaries can serve as reminders and lead to emotional distress for students with traumatic grief.

- ***Showing signs of increased aggression.*** Students may inaccurately perceive danger, feel vulnerable, or act out revenge fantasies that may seem to be coming out of nowhere because the cues are reminders of the traumatic death ("trauma reminders"). A student's seemingly inappropriate behavior may be seen as acting out or rather than unresolved traumatic grief.

- ***Attempting to avoid physical reminders of the traumatic death, such as activities, places, or people related to the death.*** Students may avoid situations or conversations they fear will provoke painful or uncomfortable thoughts or feelings about the death.

- ***Withdrawing from important aspects of their environment***

Students may lose interest or stop participating in activities they previously enjoyed or show less willingness to interact with others. In school this may take the form of not responding when called on in class, not participating in assigned group activities, not turning in homework, or withdrawing from extracurricular or social activities.

- ***Showing signs of emotional constriction***

Students may not experience either negative or positive emotions and appear "numb" or "flat."

- ***Being excessively "jumpy" or being easily startled***

Students may seem to be constantly on the alert or on edge. This can also result in their being overly aroused, as seen by their increased activity levels, inability to settle down, and difficulty sleeping which impairs school performance. For example, students with traumatic grief may become highly reactive to a sudden noise as minor as a pencil dropping in the classroom after a school shooting.

- ***Showing signs of a loss of a sense of purpose and meaning to one's life***

A traumatized student may show disinterest in previously valued goals or activities or may engage in increased risk-taking because "it doesn't matter anymore".

- ***Displaying poor academic performance:*** The student has ongoing difficulty concentrating or participating in classroom assignments and activities (compared to their functioning before the death).

- ***Having persistent emotional distress:*** The student continues to show significant difficulty regulating emotions (for example, repeated episodes of crying, irritability, or fits of rage), especially in relation to reminders of the death or ongoing absence of the deceased.

- ***Showing signs that the student is depressed, withdrawn, and non-communicative:*** A student may show signs of lethargy, negative mood, disruptions in appetite, loss of interest in valued activities, significant changes in weight, poor personal hygiene, decreased interaction with others, e.g. peers, family, and/or adults.

- ***Expressing thoughts of suicide or homicide, or signs that the student is intentionally hurting him- or herself (for example, a child cutting himself):*** A student may express thoughts of suicide or homicide verbally or via a journal or music lyrics, or you may observe marks or bruises from cutting or burning. You should take these behaviors seriously and immediately report them to the child's parents and appropriate school personnel.

- ***Increasing in antisocial or delinquent behavior:*** Truancy, aggression, stealing, lying, verbal threats, drug/alcohol use, or other behaviors that place youths or others around them at increased risk of harm are indicators that a referral is needed.

### *Prepare and plan for school reentry*

Check in with the family to help the student and prepare him or her and staff with their return to school after the death. Keep in mind that not all students want their peers to know about the death. Talk to the family about their wishes and the student's preference for what and how much information is most helpful to communicate to peers and others about the death. Ask how peers can help.

### *Create a supportive school environment*

Maintain normal school routines as much as possible. A student with traumatic grief can feel as if life is chaotic and out of his or her control. It helps to have a predictable class schedule and format. The student may need extra reassurance and explanation about any changes. You should look for opportunities to help classmates who are struggling with how best to help and understand a student with traumatic grief.

### *Listen and be available*

After a student's family member has died, take a moment to privately express your sympathy for the loss. Let the student know he or she can come to you for any reason, such as needing to take breaks from the classroom, extra time for assignments or tests, or other requests. Do not force a student to talk about the death; this may be more harmful than helpful.

### *Accept a range of responses*

A student may or may not need to talk. Listen calmly to a student's feelings, worries, or academic problems. Conversely, some traumatized students may talk about things unrelated to the death to take a break from their grief. Accept their feelings (even anger) and remind them that it's normal to experience emotional and behavioral difficulties following the death of an important person.

### *Answer a child's questions*

As students try to make sense of the death of their important person, they may ask adults relatively shocking questions, including questions that focus on gruesome details. It's OK to say you don't know the answer to a question. Don't provide gory details as these are best managed by a mental health professional.

***Understand angry or aggressive outbursts.*** Take a student aside and provide time to calm down. Don't be punitive, but address aggressive or self-destructive activities quickly and firmly. Talk to the student later in private and help to label negative feelings. Help the student to refrain from engaging in self-destructive or self-defeating behaviors. Grieving students need caring limit setting. Collaborate with the guidance counselor or other mental health professional for discipline strategies.

### *Raise the awareness of school staff and personnel in the school community*

Educate and collaborate with others in the school environment who are in contact with the student (e.g. coaches, special activity staff) who may misinterpret changes in the behaviors and be confused by the reactions of a student with traumatic grief. Share information and suggestions for helping the student manage specific trauma reminders.

### *Understand and minimize traumatic reminders in the school setting*

Trauma reminders are cues that remind the student of the traumatic death. These are often specific to the individual student and may be hard to predict. When students with traumatic grief encounter these reminders, they develop traumatic symptoms like those described above. You can help by collaborating with family and counselors to (1) inquire about any specific reminders for the student, (2) recognize and minimize the student's trauma reminders in the school setting, and (3) support the student in using coping skills if and when reactions to trauma reminders occur.

### *Modify teaching strategies*

Balance normal school expectations with flexibility. Consider postponing or canceling large tests or projects that require extensive energy and concentration for a period of time. Be sensitive when the student is having difficulty, for example, on the anniversary of a death or related to certain triggering topics or assignments. Consider ways to rearrange or modify class assignments or work. Use teaching strategies that promote concentration, retention, and recall and that increase a sense of predictability, control, and performance.

### ***Support families***

Build a relationship of trust with the student's family. Talk about re-integration into the class upon the student's return and the family's preferences for sharing information with others. Maintain open communication with the family about the student's behavior and progress, and provide suggestions for educational support at home. Follow through and never betray the family's trust. It can be helpful to designate a liaison who can coordinate among you, the principal, guidance counselor, other appropriate school personnel, the family, and the student.

### ***Inform others and coordinate services***

Inform school administration and school counselors/psychologists about your concerns regarding the student. Coordinate help related to the student, academic performance, the loss, the family, or the home.

### ***Realize that it can be difficult to acknowledge or deal with traumatic events and death***

You should monitor your own thoughts and feelings about the death and the student and family's experience, seek support from other staff when needed, and engage in positive relationships and activities with supportive family members and friends outside of work.

### ***Make referrals***

Traumatic grief can be very difficult to resolve, and professional help is often needed. Coordinate with the appropriate staff for a referral to a professional, preferably who has experience working with children and adolescents and with the issues of grief and trauma.

### **Where do you find additional information and help?**

Effective treatments are available for Childhood Traumatic Grief and children can return to their normal functioning. Additional information for children, parents, professionals, pediatricians, and educators is available at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org) with materials specific to traumatic grief at [www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief](http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief).