



# **School Crisis Management Plan**

Wakulla County School District  
Student Services Department

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**Wakulla County School District**  
**Crisis Response Policy**

**A. Crisis Response Intent and Definition**

1. A crisis response policy is intended to ensure staff and student safety through a time-limited and problem-focused intervention to identify, manage and resolve the crisis by utilization and deployment of the Crisis Response Team and identified supporting community agencies.
2. Crises include but are not limited to the death of a student, school employee, former student or school volunteer by suicide, accident, or illness; serious bodily injury of a student, school employee, former student or school volunteer by suicide, accident, or illness.
3. The Principal of each school and/or Superintendent will determine when a crisis incident has occurred and convene the Crisis Response Team.
  - i. The Crisis Response Team and supporting school staff will follow the Crisis Response Procedures with the intent to reduce emotional trauma and assist in recovery from emotional trauma.

**B. Crisis Response Team**

1. A Crisis Response Team (CRT) will be established at each school to assist with crisis management during a crisis situation.
2. Each school will complete and utilize the Site-Based Crisis Response Team Worksheet (see Appendix A) to identify the school staff to serve on the CRT and establish key roles.
  - i. Specific roles and responsibilities for the CRT are outlined in the Site-Based CRT Worksheet. The Site-Based CRT Worksheet will be updated at the beginning of each school year.
3. The purpose of a CRT is to create an immediately accessible group of school staff to carry out necessary action following a crisis situation.
  - i. Staff involved in this plan can include but are not limited to the Principal, Assistant Principal, Guidance Counselor/Dean of Student Services, Teacher or Coach, School Nurse or Clinic Staff, and the School Resource Officer.

**C. Crisis Management Plan**

The Crisis Management Plan will include information for pre-planning, response to a crisis, and post-crisis intervention, including the following:

1. Creation of a CRT at each school utilizing the Site-Based CRT Worksheet
  - i. Identification of CRT Members (as well as alternate members in the event a designee is unable to fulfill their roll)
  - ii. Documentation of contact information for CRT Members
  - iii. Distribution of the completed Site-Based CRT Worksheet with contact information will ensure clear communication during a crisis.
2. Explanation of procedures following a crisis situation while school is in session
3. Explanation of procedures following a crisis situation during a school break
  - i. Crisis over the summer, winter break or spring break
4. Spokesperson to the media/Media Liaison
  - i. This will be the Superintendent of the School District or a designee that the Superintendent specifically allows to provide information to the media
  - ii. **ALL** information provided to the media must first be verified with the Wakulla County Sherriff's office to present the most accurate information
5. A meeting with the department heads and/or team leaders and the CRT will be called as soon as possible (preferably before school on the day following a crisis) by the Principal to initiate the crisis management plan and inform department heads of crisis situation
6. Communication within the school and to community members
  - i. Communication techniques may differ depending on the crisis situation
  - ii. Information provided to students and staff including any announcements made in school or letters/calls to parents/guardians must be approved by the Principal to ensure accuracy of information and reduce rumors
  - iii. Principals will have sample documents for a variety of communication including letters/notification to parents and information on how to acknowledge a crisis situation with students
  - iv. Teachers and staff will receive a script and/or guidelines for classroom discussion as provided by the Principal or designee (See Appendix D)
7. Arrangement for support services
  - i. A designee from the CRT will be responsible for contacting the district office to alert staff to a crisis
  - ii. A designee from the CRT will be responsible for contacting Big Bend Hospice or other approved agency to request Grief Counselors/Counselors at the school to assist students and staff with processing their grief
  - iii. A 'safe room' or designated safe space will be identified as a meeting place for students and counselors

- iv. A designee will be responsible for contacting substitute teachers or district office staff to be on stand-by if a teacher or staff member requires bereavement services and is unable to remain in the classroom
8. Crisis Checklists
- i. Crisis checklists will provide a simple guide to ensure the crisis management plan is fully carried out on the next school day following a crisis
  - ii. Crisis checklists will include tasks to be carried out on day one, day two, and two weeks from the crisis to ensure appropriate follow-up with students and staff that may require additional supportive services

(Adapted from the Virginia Department of Education-Division of Special Education and Student Services)

**Wakulla County School District**  
**Crisis Management Plan**  
**Procedures**

**A. Overview**

1. The intent of this Crisis Management Plan is to provide a guide for faculty/staff of Wakulla County School District in responding to a crisis situation.
  - a. As a reminder, for the purpose of this plan, crises include but are not limited to the death of a student, school employee, former student or school volunteer by suicide, accident, or illness; serious bodily injury of a student, school employee, former student or school volunteer by suicide, accident, or illness.
2. The following Crisis Management Plan is to ensure staff and student safety through a time-limited and problem-focused intervention to identify, manage and resolve the crisis by utilization and deployment of the Crisis Response Team and identified supporting community agencies.

## B. Crisis Response Procedures

### 1. Immediately Following Notification of a Crisis

- i. Contact designee (Superintendent/Principal/Team Leader) to inform of possible death or serious bodily injury
- ii. Designee to immediately verify the reported incident by contacting the police liaison to reduce/dispel any misinformation
- iii. If notification of the crisis situation occurs at night or over the weekend designee to contact CRT Coordinator to begin phone tree contacts at both the district office and school levels

### 2. Following Verification of a Crisis

The following steps are outlined by order of priority. However, many of these steps will likely happen simultaneously.

- i. Principal and/or Team Leader to convene the CRT, preferably before school hours, to review procedures and plan for the upcoming school day
- ii. Principal and/or Team Leader to convene or e-mail department heads and/or team leaders with short description of crisis situation to reduce rumors and provide the most accurate information available. Guidelines and tips on talking to students will be provided to department heads.
  - a. Department heads and/or team leaders to notify their staff and provide sheet of guidelines and tips on talking to students in class
- iii. Principal/Superintendent/or designee to prepare formal statement for initial announcement to the school staff, students and parents
  - a. This will include only minimal details the school is legally allowed to share (only public information as provided by the police liaison during verification of crisis)
- iv. CRT designee(s) to carry out plan including (but not limited to):
  - a. Contacting outside community mental health agencies to assist with grief counseling on campus throughout the day
  - b. Staffing and setting up safe room where students who need to speak with a counselor can be sent throughout the day
  - c. Provide staff in the safe room with student contact log (See Appendix B). This will be used to identify students that might require follow-up/long term grief counseling and for attendance purposes
- v. Designee to inform all staff/teachers of location of safe room for the day to allow staff/teachers to send students requiring bereavement services
- vi. Designee to determine if additional staff support is necessary and contact substitute teachers/district office staff to be on standby if a school staff member needs to be relieved for bereavement services

- vii. If necessary, assign a grief counselor/designee/District Licensed Clinical Social Worker to follow a deceased student's class schedule for the day if this would be beneficial to teachers
  - viii. Principal and/or Team Leader to determine mode of announcement (via public address or class by class) and announce to students and staff
3. Following the school-wide announcement
- Assigned Staff to complete the following:
- i. Monitor for students leaving campus without permission. Re-direct to safe room to speak with grief counselor/counselor or allow student to call home
  - ii. If the crisis situation involves the death or serious bodily injury of a student:
    - a. Notify the bus drivers. Especially those who drove the student and may require additional support
    - b. Collect belongings from his/her locker
    - c. Officially withdraw the student to remove from attendance lists
  - iii. Contact other schools in the district to identify any schools that may require additional supports including on campus grief counseling services



### **C. Annual Initiation of Crisis Response Team Procedures for All Schools**

A meeting with the CRT will occur at the beginning of each school year

1. Utilize the Site-Based Crisis Response Team Worksheet to identify staff involved in the CRT for that school year
  - i. Confirm membership on the CRT at the beginning of each school year. Update contact information or assign new staff as needed
  - ii. Review CRT member roles and responsibilities and talk through the procedures of what will happen on the day of a crisis situation to ensure each CRT member is comfortable with their role
2. Send a copy of the completed Site-Based CRT Worksheet to the Student Services Department at the District Office via e-mail, interoffice mail or fax
3. Provide copies of the completed Site-Based CRT Worksheet to CRT team members and any identified school staff that would benefit from having the information
4. Discuss and identify alternate designees for the CRT in the event a staff member is unable to fulfill their duties
5. Plan another CRT meeting for mid-way through the school year. It is necessary that the CRT meet at the beginning of the school year and recommended that another meeting is scheduled to review the plan and make updates to CRT membership if needed
6. Update staff phone tree to ensure reliable communication during a crisis situation

#### D. Crisis Response Team

1. The CRT will operate under the leadership and supervision of the Principal and/or Team Leader who will coordinate and supervise all crisis response activities
2. The CRT will be comprised of a:  
Responsibilities of these roles are outlined in the Site-Based Crisis Response Worksheet (Appendix A)
  - i. Crisis Response Team Coordinator
  - ii. Family Liaison
  - iii. Media Liaison-The **Superintendent** serves as the **only** contact person for the media unless otherwise specifically designated by the Superintendent
  - iv. Communications Coordinator
  - v. Staff Notification and Support
  - vi. Student Notification and Support
  - vii. Safe Room Coordinator
  - viii. Crowd Management-The Student Resource Officer assigned to your school will likely manage this position.
3. The CRT will complete and utilize the Site-Based Crisis Response Worksheet to ensure effective communication and response during a crisis situation
4. CRT Members will participate in two CRT meetings each school year
  - i. One meeting at the beginning of the school year and one half-way through the school year
5. CRT Members will provide guidance and assistance to all school staff and students during a crisis situation to reduce ongoing traumas
6. The CRT will have a debriefing following a crisis situation
  - i. This time will allow CRT Members to support each other and review effectiveness of the Crisis Management Plan

## **E. Crisis Management During a School Break**

1. If a staff member is alerted to a crisis over the summer, during Thanksgiving break, during Winter Break or during spring break the school response will be more limited. The following steps should be taken if this occurs:
  - i. Initiate phone tree to reach all Crisis Response Team Members-The Principal should contact the Superintendent who will then initiate the District Office phone tree
  - ii. Principal and/or Team Leader or Crisis Response Team Coordinator will request a short meeting with CRT if possible. If not, communicate via telephone
  - iii. Identify close friends/staff most likely to be affected by the crisis. CRT Designee should keep the list and follow-up with those individuals once school resumes
  - iv. As appropriate, CRT Designee should contact those individuals identified in iii to offer community resources including grief counseling information
  - v. Notify faculty/staff, as appropriate, via telephone or update department heads at a meeting the morning school re-opens.
  - vi. CRT Member and supporting staff to determine if individual or group grief counseling should be requested upon return to school

(Adapted from the Commonwealth High School Crisis Management Plan)

**Wakulla County School District**  
**Crisis Response Plan**  
**Crisis Checklist**

**Day 1:**

Use in the event of serious bodily injury or death of a student, staff member, former student, or volunteer

\_\_\_\_\_ Notify Superintendent

\_\_\_\_\_ Verify that the incident occurred

\_\_\_\_\_ Convene CRT (CRT Designees to carry out duties below depending on their role)

\_\_\_\_\_ Principal to convene Department Heads or team leaders (if possible) for crisis notification

\_\_\_\_\_ Contact outside grief counseling support to ensure on campus assistance

\_\_\_\_\_ Principal to prepare formal statement or announcement to students, parents and staff

\_\_\_\_\_ Staff safe room and alert school staff to its location for grieving students and staff---  
Designee to ensure student contact log is in the safe room for future follow-up

\_\_\_\_\_ Contact substitute teachers/additional District Office staff to be on standby

\_\_\_\_\_ Provide school staff with guidelines/tips on talking to students who are upset

\_\_\_\_\_ Make contact with the family of the injured/deceased to offer support and, as appropriate, obtain information that can be shared with grieving students/staff  
\*\*REMINDER: DO NOT share any information that is not public knowledge (received through verification process-public records with the local sheriff's office) or that is not approved by the family of the injured/deceased

\_\_\_\_\_ Superintendent to remain only contact person for the media

\_\_\_\_\_ Contact other schools in the district to see if additional grief counselors/counselors are required in other locations

\_\_\_\_\_ Principal to make official announcement

\_\_\_\_\_ Provide Employee Assistance Program information to school staff who may need ongoing grief counseling-Check on staff throughout the day to allow time to grieve

\_\_\_\_\_ CRT Members to debrief at the end of the school day

## **Day 2**

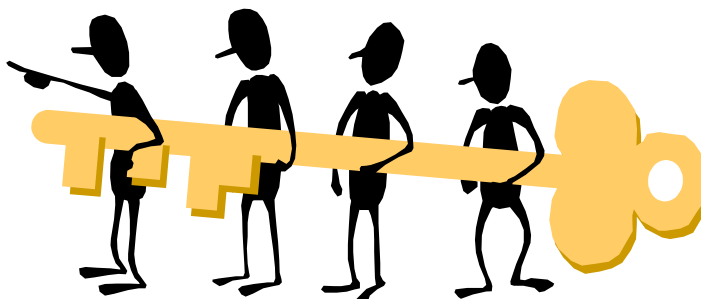
- \_\_\_\_\_ Gather CRT Members, Department Heads and/or Team Leaders, as necessary, prior to student arrival to provide any updates
- \_\_\_\_\_ In a crisis involving a death, provide funeral/visitation information if known and if provided by the family or shared with the public
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inform faculty and staff that grieving students can report to their counselors throughout the day if needed

## **Long-Term Follow-Up (Completed within the weeks following crisis situation)**

- \_\_\_\_\_ CRT Designee to utilize the Student Contact Log to identify and follow-up with any students who might need referrals for long-term counseling or grief counseling
- \_\_\_\_\_ Convene CRT to review the procedures carried out during crisis situation and discuss items that worked well for your school and what adjustments might need to be made
- \_\_\_\_\_ Write thank-you notes to outside community agencies that provided on campus counseling assistance during crisis situation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remain alert and aware that students may have a difficult time around the crisis anniversary (One month, six months, one year, etc.)

(Adapted from the Commonwealth High School Crisis Management Plan)

**Site-Based Crisis Response Team Worksheet**  
**Wakulla County School District**  
**School Year: 2016-2017**  
**Key Roles on the Crisis Response Team**



- **Crisis Response Team Coordinator**- This person presides over all the crisis team meetings and manages the specific functioning of the team.
- **Family Liaison**- This person serves as the contact person for the family of the deceased. Necessary skills include empathy, good communication, and knowledge in the grief process. Responsibilities include offering support and information to and obtaining needed information from the family.
- **Media Liaison**- The Superintendent serves as the only contact person for the media. Responsibilities include communicating with media that contacts the school, and explaining rules for press verbally and in writing.
- **Communications Coordinator**- This person carries out all in-house communication. Responsibilities include screening and logging of all incoming calls related to the crisis and assisting in maintaining an up-to-date directory of district staff and community resources.
- **Staff Notification and Support**- This person serves as the contact person for staff. Responsibilities including informing staff of crisis, providing ongoing updates to staff, and serving as a source of support for staff members affected by the crisis.
- **Student Notification and Support**- This person informs students of the crisis. Responsibilities include obtaining facts to help dispel rumors and informing students of support systems in place for their use.
- **Safe Room Coordinator**- This person is in charge of setting up the “safe room”. Responsibilities include identifying an appropriate location, gathering appropriate supplies, and contacting safe room facilitators (including outside mental health agencies).
- **Crowd Management**- This person works with local law enforcement to plan for crowd management, in the event of potential crises.

<b>Site-based Crisis Response Team Members</b>	
Name of School: _____	
Address: _____	Phone: _____
<b>Crisis Response Team Coordinator</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Family Liaison</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Media Liaison</b>	
Name: Robert Pearce	Position: Superintendent
Phone: 850-926-0065	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Communications Coordinator</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Staff Notification and Support</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Student Notification and Support</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Safe Room Coordinator</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Crowd Management</b>	
Name:	Position:
Phone:	Cell:
e-mail:	Pager:
<b>Community Partners</b>	
Name: Big Bend Hospice	Position: Bereavement Services Manager
Phone: 850-671-6078	Cell: 850-556-0569
e-mail: <a href="mailto:pam@bigbendhospice.org">pam@bigbendhospice.org</a>	Pager:





### **Announcement of Serious Accident/Serious Bodily Injury**

“Good Morning Students, Faculty and Staff. I am sad to announce that \_\_\_\_\_ has been in a serious accident/has been seriously injured. For those of you who would like extra support, we have additional staff on campus throughout the day. Please get a pass from your teacher and they can direct you to the location of these supportive services.

“As soon as we know the wishes of the family regarding \_\_\_\_\_ we will share that information with you. We ask that all students follow their regular schedules today.”

(Adapted from the Commonwealth High School Crisis Management Plan)

### **Announcement of Death**

“As many of you might be aware, we received sad news that \_\_\_\_\_ has died. Guidance Counselors/Deans of Student Services as well as grief counselors will be on campus today to talk with those of you who would like extra support. Students, your teachers can direct you to the location of these supportive services. Please ask your teacher for a pass before leaving the classroom.

“We ask that all students follow their regular schedules today.”

“Let us have a moment of silence.....Thank you.”

(Adapted from the Commonwealth High School Crisis Management Plan)

**Template for Letters/E-mails/Phone Calls to Parents**  
**Student Death-Elementary School**

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As some of you might already know, one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_, has died. Our faculty and staff will not elaborate with students on events surrounding \_\_\_\_\_'s death. However, many students are asking questions and our staff will respond honestly that \_\_\_\_\_ has died and we will miss him/her greatly.

Our Guidance Counselor and Licensed Clinical Social Worker will be available in the upcoming weeks to talk with students who might need help processing their feelings. Any death is difficult for children to understand. \_\_\_\_\_'s death is particularly difficult due to his/her young age.

Please take time to discuss \_\_\_\_\_'s death with your child as he/she might need help processing their feelings and reactions during this time. We are enclosing some handouts on how to talk to your child about the death of a loved one. (For a phone notification—offer the handouts to the parents/guardians)

If you feel that your child would benefit from talking with our Guidance Counselor or our school Licensed Clinical Social Worker, please call us at the school at 850-\_\_\_\_\_.

The faculty, staff and students extend our heartfelt sympathies to the \_\_\_\_\_ family.

Sincerely,

School Principal

(Adapted from the Commonwealth High School Crisis Management Plan)

### **Guidelines/Tips for Faculty and Staff on Talking to Students After a Death**

- Try to dispel rumors. If you overhear students talking about specifics regarding the death, try to re-direct and remind students that this is a difficult time for everyone. Talking about the manner in which someone died can be painful for others to overhear. Try using “Let’s focus on how we are feeling about his/her death and what we can do to heal” or encourage them to use available counseling.
- Allow students to express emotions. It is natural for students to become tearful, if this persists reassure the student it is ok to be sad and guide them to talk with counselors on staff. Let students know it is natural to experience “grief bursts” after a loss.
- Listen to what the student has to say. It’s important to allow students to express their thoughts, feelings and reactions.
- Remind students that everyone grieves differently. Some students find talking about their relationship with the deceased helpful while others don’t like to grieve in a group setting. There is no right way to grieve.
- If the student died from an illness and it is appropriate to do so, discuss the illness. Especially with younger children, they need reassurance that the stomach ache or cold they had last week does not mean they too will pass away.
- Allow students to discuss other losses they have faced. It is important for them to understand that this loss might bring up feelings from a past loss they have experienced and this is normal.
- Encourage students to discuss their feelings and reactions with their parents/guardians/family. If they are not able to do so, encourage them to talk with the Guidance Counselor/Dean of Student Services who can counsel or refer to an outside agency for long-term counseling.
- Be honest, especially with younger children. Try to avoid phrases like “he/she is in a better place” or “he/she is resting”, this is likely to confuse the child. Instead, try “(Name of Student) has died and we will all miss our friend very much”.
- If a suicide occurs, discuss general facts and myths as appropriate. (See Appendix D-2)

(Adapted from the Virginia Department of Education-Division of Special Education and Student Services)

## Talking About Suicide

<p><b>Give Accurate Information About Suicide</b> Suicide is a complicated behavior. It is not caused by a single event such as a bad grade, an argument with parents/friends, or the breakup of a relationship.</p> <p>In most cases, suicide is caused by an underlying mental disorder like depression or substance abuse. Mental disorders affect the way people feel and prevent them from thinking clearly and rationally. Having a mental disorder is nothing to be ashamed of and help is available.</p> <p>Talking about suicide in a calm, straight-forward manner does not put ideas into kids' minds.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “The cause of _____’s death was a suicide. Suicide is most often caused by serious mental disorders like depression, combined with other complications”</p> <p>“There is help available to people having suicidal thoughts”</p> <p>“Mental Disorders are not something to be ashamed of and there are very good therapies and treatments to help with depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, etc”</p> <p>“We have a lot of very good counseling services that we can connect you with if you need someone to talk to”</p>
<p><b>Address Blaming and Scapegoating</b> It is common to try to answer the question “why?” after a suicide death. Sometimes this can turn into blaming others for the death.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “The reasons that someone dies by suicide are not simple, and are related to mental health disorders that get in the way of the person thinking clearly. Blaming others—or blaming the person who died—does not acknowledge the reality that the person was battling mental health issues”</p>
<p><b>Do Not Focus on the Method or Graphic Details</b> Talking in graphic detail about the method can create images that are upsetting and can increase the risk of imitative behavior by vulnerable youth.</p> <p>If asked, do not lie about the cause of death. It’s ok to say they died by suicide but avoid details. The focus should not be on how someone killed themselves but rather on how to cope with feelings of sadness, loss, anger, etc.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “It is tragic that he/she died by suicide. Let’s talk about how _____’s death has affected you and ways for you to manage your feelings”</p> <p>“How can we figure out the best ways to deal with your loss and grief?”</p>

<p><b>Address Anger</b> Accept expressions of anger at the deceased and explain that these feelings are normal.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “It is ok to feel angry. These feelings are normal and it doesn’t mean that you didn’t care about _____. You can be angry at someone’s actions and still care deeply about that person.”</p>
<p><b>Address Feelings of Responsibility</b> Reassure those who feel responsible or think they could have done something to save the deceased.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “His/her death is not your fault.”  “We can’t always predict someone else’s behavior.”  “We can’t always control someone else’s behavior.”</p>
<p><b>Encourage Help-Seeking</b> Encourage students to seek help from a trusted adult if they or a friend are feeling depressed or suicidal.</p>	<p><b>By Saying...</b> “We are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried or depressed?”  “There are effective therapies and treatments to help people who have depression, anxiety, or are engaging in self-injurious behaviors. We can always help you connect with a counselor to help you.”  “This is an important time for us to support one another. If you are concerned about your feelings or if you are concerned about a friend, tell a trusted adult.”</p>

(Source: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center. 2011. *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.)



## TIPS FOR HELPERS RESPONDING TO A DEATH THAT AFFECTS CHILDREN AND TEENS

Responding to a death at school or in the community can be overwhelming, complex, and exhausting. It is a natural reaction to try to put one's own feelings and needs on hold and to focus instead on meeting the needs of students, parents, colleagues, and others around us.

We as helpers can practice good self-care for ourselves though, by being comfortable enough to do the opposite. Rather than putting our own feelings and reactions on hold, we can choose safe places to process and mourn both publically and privately. We can model safe behaviors, be honest with our own reactions, and by doing so provide safe havens and examples for those around us who are grieving.

Here are some frequently questions asked by helpers:

- **Is it o.k. to cry in front of my students and colleagues?**  
Some people may react by crying in response to a death at school or in the community. Perhaps the tears are because the person that died was special to you. On the other hand, even if you don't feel a sense of personal loss, perhaps the death brings up unexpected reminders and feelings from other losses you've had. Or it may serve as a reminder of one's own mortality.
- **What if I cry so hard I lose control?**  
It is fine if you get teary while talking with children and teens after a loss. You may even have "grief bursts" which are short bursts of tears and/or strong emotion throughout the day. If you are crying so hard that you truly lose control, it may be best to seek out a quiet place until you regain composure. Seeing adults show emotion can be normalizing and validating for young people – but seeing too much can be disturbing or even scary.
- **Is it natural not to cry or feel anything following a death at school or community organization? Will my superiors, students, and colleagues think I am heartless?** Reactions to loss differ from person to person. One common response in the initial stages of loss may be a feeling of emptiness, numbness, or a sense of just "going through the motions."

On the other hand, if you truly do not perceive the death as a loss, you may not be grieving. It helps to accept your own reactions, as well as those of others with an attitude of patience, honesty, curiosity and tolerance.

- **I have very strong religious beliefs that I believe would help my students, but our school or agency policy does not permit me to share them. What should I do?** Children and teens, just like adults, come from a wide variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds. It is wise to honor your school's policy regarding the sharing of your personal spiritual/religious viewpoints. Instead, perhaps you can focus on the strengths and beliefs that your students already possess that can serve them well in coping with the situation.
- **What are some ways I can take care of myself in the midst of all that is happening?** Remember that grief reactions are multi-dimensional (physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and social) and occur over time. Self-care needs to involve these different dimensions as well. For example, having water and snacks handy can help you maintain your energy during the day. Perhaps taking 5 minutes to visit a friend or colleague and check in can help you cope emotionally. Psychologically, it may help to know that no matter how wonderful and grief savvy you are, you cannot fix what happened. Finally, it may mean stopping periodically throughout the day just to take some cleansing breaths, or stepping outside to take a deep breath of fresh air.

Use opportunities to process when the kids are not there, or when you leave work. Some people process by talking with others, or listening to music, writing in a journal, jogging, or sitting on the couch curled up with a pet. Whatever safe ways give you comfort. Investing in simple self-care strategies can make a small, but meaningful difference in your ability to function.

- **How long will it be before things return to normal? How long will it be before I return to normal?** Again, this will vary according to who died, the manner in which the death occurred, and how the loss was handled (were the youngsters given time to mourn the death and celebrate the life of the deceased?) The amount and type of support available to those in mourning is also a factor. It is often helpful to return to routines when possible, since this often provides a needed sense of normalcy and security. Clearly identify resources for those needing extra support over time because grief is a process, not an event. In some instances, things never return to the "normal" that used to be, but instead a "new normal" eventually emerges.

- **Where can I go if I feel I need more support in handling my reactions to following a loss?**  
The good news is that there are many places to get help. In addition to any in-school resources that are available, you may want to check with your EAP (Employee Assistance Program) to see if they can help. Big Bend Hospice can provide you with current lists of helping professionals and online resources.

Finally, there are many books and other types of media available in libraries or through online suppliers such as Compassion Books, Centering Corporation, and Amazon.com.

- **Is there a place my supervisors, colleagues, or students can go to get extra support if needed?** See the answer to above question. Again, feel free to contact Big Bend Hospice at 850-878-5310 or by e-mail at [pam@bigbendhospice.org](mailto:pam@bigbendhospice.org).



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## HOW TO HELP KIDS COPE AT SCHOOL

### Ways Grief Can Affect Children:

- ◆ Student wants to call home during day
- ◆ Student cannot concentrate on school work
- ◆ Student has “griefbursts” with spells of crying during day
- ◆ Student becomes class clown to get attention
- ◆ Student may be tired during the day because of sleep disruptions or nightmares at night
- ◆ Increased absenteeism
- ◆ Reduced levels of motivation
- ◆ Increased attention-seeking behavior
- ◆ Increased anger or aggression
- ◆ Deterioration in school work
- ◆ Increase in physical symptoms: stomachaches, headaches, stress-related illness
- ◆ Depression or withdrawal

### Helping Kids Cope at School:

- ◆ Keep things as “normal” as possible—under the best of conditions children do not like to be singled out
- ◆ Create a signal and a plan with the child that allows him to leave the classroom or situation if needed
- ◆ Establish a safe, quiet alternative to the classroom if the child needs space
- ◆ Allow the child to call home if necessary
- ◆ Talk with the child to determine what she wants the other students to know and who should tell them
- ◆ Help the child with words to use when others ask questions that they do not want to answer
- ◆ Reasonable adaptation of work and assignments may be beneficial
- ◆ Create some private time in the daily schedule

**Grief Work Means:**

- ◆ Understanding that the loss is real
- ◆ Feeling the emotions
- ◆ Readjusting to life without the person who has died
- ◆ Transforming the emotional energy of grief into life again

**Grieving Children Need:**

- ◆ Information that is both fact-based and appropriate for their developmental level
- ◆ An open forum to talk about the loss and the person (i.e., “tell the story”)
- ◆ Support of family and friends
- ◆ Reassurance that their basic needs will be met
- ◆ Reassurance that their feelings and thoughts (their own grief experience) is “normal,” that everyone experiences grief
- ◆ Time to express their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors regarding the loss
- ◆ Schedules and boundaries as close to normal as possible
- ◆ Opportunities to say goodbye and/or memorialize their loved one

**Remember the “5 R’s” of Grieving:**

- ◆ **Realizing** that everyone experiences loss
- ◆ **Recognizing** that grief is a natural human response to loss
- ◆ **Remembering** our losses and the ways they affect our lives, both healthy and unhealthy ways
- ◆ **Redefining** the way we view loss and its consequences in ourselves and in others
- ◆ **Redeeming** loss through positive acts of love and service instead of self-defeating behaviors

**“Red Flag” Behaviors when Coping with Loss:**

- ◆ Suicidal thoughts or action
- ◆ Chronic depression, sleeping difficulties, and low self-esteem
- ◆ Isolation from family and friends
- ◆ Academic failure or overachievement
- ◆ Dramatic change in personality or attitude
- ◆ Eating disorders
- ◆ Drug and alcohol abuse
- ◆ Fighting or legal troubles
- ◆ Inappropriate sexual behaviors



## HOW TO COPE WHEN A YOUNG PERSON DIES

*"This can't really be happening..."*

*"I can't believe she is gone..."*

*"It doesn't seem fair. He was so young and alive with so much ahead of him..."*

When a young person dies, these are just some of the reactions that students, parents, and school staff experience. Death is expected for those who have lived a full life, but when a young person dies, whether it is anticipated or sudden, it seems to defy the laws of nature. Especially when death comes suddenly, the loss of a child can send waves of grief, including: shock, sadness, disbelief, and other strong emotions reeling through the campus and community. Here are some tips that have helped others cope with sad news. We hope they will help you and your child/ren during this time.

### **Important Grief Facts:**

- ◆ There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- ◆ Each child or adult's grief is unique. Each student will act out their grief in a unique way and on their own timetable.
- ◆ Children grieve differently than adults.
- ◆ Support and guidance from caring adults who are respectful of a child's grief process can help children move through grief in a healthy way.

### **After hearing of a sudden death, students, parents and staff may feel:**

- ◆ Shock and disbelief: "I can't believe it's true"
- ◆ Numbness
- ◆ Sadness
- ◆ Weakness in knees
- ◆ Shortness of breath, tightness in the chest
- ◆ Anger or outrage
- ◆ Guilt: "This wouldn't have happened if only I had.... or had not..."
- ◆ Empathy or sympathy for the family of the deceased
- ◆ Sense of helplessness – "How can I help?"

**After receiving the news, children or teens may:**

- ◆ Have no reaction at all
- ◆ Burst into tears
- ◆ Display angry words or behaviors
- ◆ Blame self, others, the person who died
- ◆ Appear dazed
- ◆ Act distraught or anxious
- ◆ Be supportive or sensitive to the needs of others
- ◆ Ask many questions
- ◆ Withdraw
- ◆ Complain of physical symptoms: stomachaches, sore throats, headache

**Other symptoms children might display:**

- ◆ Changes in eating and sleeping
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating on homework or class work
- ◆ Desire to call parents at home
- ◆ Clinginess
- ◆ Fear of the dark/nightmares/monsters
- ◆ Regression
- ◆ Worry that something bad will happen to self or loved ones
- ◆ Acting the “class clown” to get attention

**The role of the school following the death of a student:**

The school is a primary element of a child’s life. Schools can provide safe forums for students, parent/guardians, and school staff to share their initial thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the bad news. A safe forum for students can mean setting aside classroom time for discussion and sharing. Staff can gather and process before or after school hours. Other schools prefer to set up a safe space where students and staff can drop by as needed basis following the incident. A letter can be sent home to parent/guardians to help them support their child. Schools can remain watchful for rumors and blame that often arise around critical incidents. Children and staff can be educated about constructive and helpful ways to handle the stresses of loss to help comfort one another. A member of the school staff can also act as a liaison with the family, to help make their wishes and needs known to the school community. An outside agency that specializes in grief issues can provide support. The school and school staff provide a sense of routine and security that is very comforting to a child

## **How parent/guardians can help their children or teens:**

### COMMUNICATION -EXPRESSION – UNDERSTANDING – PATIENCE

- ◆ Talk about what happened. Encourage, but do not force discussion. Talk about their reactions, feelings, concerns, and questions. Remember, how your child reacts depends on the relationship they had with the deceased.
- ◆ Encourage expression. Especially for those students who are uncomfortable talking, art, poetry, journaling, clay, sports and photographs can be a great release. *These opportunities for expression are very helpful for children.*
- ◆ Learn about the grief process, so you can help your child understand it, too. Talk to them about your loss experiences. There are many excellent books available that are comforting and educational for grieving children.
- ◆ Understand the factors that affect a child’s grief. These include age, developmental stage, personality, stimulus thresholds, past losses, support systems, and culture.
- ◆ The current loss might bring up your child’s past losses (including abandonment, divorce, pet loss, past deaths). Help address these feelings as they arise.
- ◆ The loss can also bring up fears in students about their own mortality or what would happen if their loved ones died. Do not dismiss his/her fears. Talk to them about who would take care of them in the event something happened. Reassure them that someone will always be there to take good care of them.
- ◆ Allow your child to take part in the funeral or other memorial activities if they wish to.
- ◆ Prepare the child ahead of time about what they might encounter at the funeral or service (sights, sounds, smells, customs, people’s behavior, etiquette, etc.).



## RESOURCES

### Students:

Gootman, Marilyn. When A Friend Dies. Free Spirit Publishing. 1994

Munday, Michaelene. Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss. Abbey Press. 1998.

Wolfelt, Alan, PhD. Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids. 100 Practical Ideas. Companion Press. 2001.

### Parents/Guardians:

O'Toole, Donna. Helping Children Grieve and Grow

### Schools:

Klicker, Ralph. A Student Dies, A School Mourns. Accelerated Development. 1999.

### Website:

GriefNet.org

<http://www.centering.org>

## **Helping Your Child through the Grieving Process: Tips for Parents and Guardians**

- As soon as possible after the death, set aside time to talk with your child
- Be honest and provide the facts in a simple (age appropriate) manner
- Use the correct language, “died” or “dead”. Try and avoid phrases such as “He/she is sleeping” as this might be confusing (especially for younger children) who often wait for the deceased to “wake up” and return to them
- Be prepared for them to ask questions, it’s ok if you don’t have all the answers
- Encourage open communication and let your child know that if they want to talk about their feelings or have questions they can do so when they are ready
- It’s ok to be emotional during the conversation, explain what you are feeling
- Allow your child to grieve in their own way, everyone will grieve differently and your child might grieve differently than you do
- If your child is having a difficult time talking about how they are feeling, ask if they would like to write their feelings down (or draw)
- Young children may display regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, or not being able to sleep in their own bed
- Sudden death of a young person can be especially hard. Some common responses to a traumatic event are disruptions in sleep, appetite and daily activities.
- However, watch for ongoing isolation, dramatic increase or decrease in food consumption, aggression, or talk of self-harm. If you notice ongoing behaviors that concern you, please seek help from a mental health professional to assist with working through their grief
- Big Bend Hospice offers grief counseling services. If you have concerns or would like to inquire regarding services for your child or teen, please call 850-878-5310