

School counselors, as well as other educators, need to be prepared to address grieving students' needs – both inside and outside the school walls.

HELP FOR GRIEVING STUDENTS

BY DAVID J. SCHONFELD, MD, AND MARCIA QUACKENBUSH

Before they complete high school, nine in 10 children will experience the death of a family member or close friend. One in 20 will lose a parent. This means that in almost every class, every year, in every school, there's likely to be at least one grieving student, if not more. Grief is, indeed, a natural occurrence. We must not lose sight, however, of how extraordinarily painful grief is for children and the impact it can have on students' learning, school performance and social/emotional development.

School counselors and other educators have unique and essential roles to play in supporting grieving students. Fairly simple interventions can help most students navigate their experience reasonably well and better manage school, friends, family and emotions. When grief becomes more challenging for a student, school counselors are well-positioned to help schools identify the problem and suggest appropriate solutions.

Advocate, Prepare, Respond

Because of their rich understanding of students' academic and emotional lives, school counselors can act as leaders in preparing school staff to support grieving students. You play a vital role in responding directly to a grieving student. This could include checking in with the student on multiple occasions over time, as children and teens often have new questions or concerns as the grief process continues. You can also prepare students for conversations in the classroom that may trigger feelings of grief and work with teachers to establish procedures for the student to leave the classroom to talk with the school counselor as necessary.

It might also involve bringing together staff involved with the student to share impressions ("How's she doing?" "Is there anything you've noticed that has been helpful when he is upset?"), providing guidance ("Remember to check in with the student once in awhile and see how it's going") and exchanging ideas about what sort of academic adjustments are appropriate, ensuring all of the staff balance the academic and extracurricular demands so they don't collectively exceed the student's current capacity.

Consider taking on the role of point person for the student's family members so they always have someone specific they can contact if they have concerns and so the school and family can monitor the student's adjustment and share ideas of how best to be of support. You can also provide a vital service to the family members by putting them in touch with community resources to address their grief-support needs as well as those of the student.

All individuals, whether child or adult, experience grief in a unique way. Responses will depend on factors such as age and developmental level; relationship with the deceased; circumstances of the death; previous experience with death, loss or trauma; and the types of changes occurring in the person's life as a result of the death.

For children, grief can have a considerable impact on learning and school performance. It's quite common for children to experience at least temporary difficulty with concentration and to easily

be distracted. They may be confused or overwhelmed by their school assignments or lose interest in them. Academically successful students may be discouraged if their grades slip, and students considering or already applying to college may find any impact on academic success very upsetting.

Struggling students may see learning problems worsen. Reach out proactively to students after a significant loss and offer learning support and accommodations. Don't wait for learning challenges to become academic failure. School should be a source of support for grieving students, but if academic challenges go unchecked, school may instead become another source of distress.

In addition to potential academic challenges, grieving students might also experience a range of other challenges, such as feelings of anxiety and sadness. Sleep problems are common. Outbursts of anger or despair or expressions of guilt and shame frequently occur. Younger children especially may not know that when someone we're close to dies we often feel badly, assume we did something bad and then wonder what we did, didn't do or should have done that may have prevented the death. Reassuring children that these feelings of guilt are common and that feeling guilty doesn't mean you are guilty can be helpful. In older children and teens, risky behaviors involving drinking, drugs, sex or taking dares may increase.

These are often new and powerful experiences for grieving children. They may be perplexed about what's happening and how to talk about it. They may be unable to request help because they can't imagine what might make them feel better. Children and teens may withdraw or become isolated at such times. They may be embarrassed by their strong feelings.

Honest conversation and emotional support can make a difference, but adults often aren't comfortable talking with children about death. Most educators have had little or no training about what to say or do when a student is grieving. Often, their peers don't know what to say either. Without effective support, the overall impact on a student's development, behavior and emotional adjustment can be profound.

What Can Schools Do?

There are three main steps school staff can take to support grieving students.

Acknowledge the loss. A common choice adults often make is simply to avoid talking about the death. They feel awkward, they don't want to cause more pain for a student, and they don't know what to say. This is the worst possible course. Silence may say to children:

- I don't care.
- This isn't important.
- I'm not willing to give you support.
- This is too overwhelming for me to deal with.
- I don't think you're able to cope, even with my help.

No one wants to give these sorts of hurtful, isolating messages to grieving children. You can make a world of difference with a simple, straightforward comment, such as, "I was so sorry to hear about your sister's death. I'm thinking about you and your family." It can be as easy as that.

Offer support and information to children and their families. It's important to be prepared to talk with families immediately after a death. Often, families speak to school staff before they've been in touch with other professionals such as pediatricians or mental health professionals. School staff may be able to give guidance about such things as how to support children attending the funeral, how parents can support the child's academic efforts, how to provide emotional support for the family and what to expect over time as the child's expressions of grief change. You should be aware of community resources to support grieving children and adults and share this information with families.

You can also help guide other students so they feel better prepared to talk with and support the grieving student. This may minimize isolation and teasing the student might otherwise experience.

Take steps to ensure school is a safe place, not a source of additional distress. It's normal for grieving students to struggle with classwork or find it challenging to manage extracurricular activities. But those students may be facing academic setbacks or school failure for the first time in their lives. This can create anxiety and frustration. Schools should be prepared



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FOR MORE INFO

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students

www.grievingstudents.org

A collaboration of organizations of education professionals, including ASCA, the coalition hosts a website offering a rich set of free resources to help education professionals provide support that is both practical and meaningful. The coalition offers free learning modules on a wide range of issues related to grieving students. These include videos and printable written summaries.

Also available at www.grievingstudents.org:

“After a Loved One Dies: How Children Grieve & How to Support Them”: A free booklet, available in English or Spanish, hard copy or PDF, published by the New York Life Foundation.

“The Grieving Student: A Teacher’s Guide”: Provides practical information for teachers and other school professionals about many issues related to grieving students, published by Brooks Publishing.

Teacher Training Modules: Found in the Additional Resources section of www.grievingstudents.org, these free downloadable PowerPoint presentations for school counselors to use in presentations to other school professionals. The full script to accompany the presentation can be found by opening the presentations in the Notes view and can be edited to customize the training.

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Provides support and guidance to individual schools by e-mail at info@grievingstudents.org or by phone at (877) 53-NCSCB.

to adapt school work in a range of ways, and to let grieving students know this is a reasonable and appropriate step, not a sign of failure. This might include such things as postponing a test, allowing a student to complete a paper instead of taking a final or providing alternative activities that better match the student’s current ability to concentrate and complete work.

One more essential consideration for schools is preparing for the impact of social media when a death occurs in the school community. In today’s world of instant news and pervasive social media exchange, there is often little time to prepare a response to a death. Ideally, of course, a school would first arrange a meeting for teachers, discuss what has occurred and plan how and when to talk to students. However, this is simply not possible when students learn of a death on Facebook over a lunch break.

Although social media is a demanding element of this process, it is not inevitably a negative one. Yes, it can be a cause of distress. It can also be a source of support. You can help other school staff appreciate the wide spectrum of possible social media presents.

Here are three stories demonstrating some of the ways social media is influencing young people’s experience of risk, grief and loss today.

A Letter on Facebook *A young man graduated from a private K-12 parochial school. He returned to the school a few months after graduation. In the middle of the school day, in full view of the elementary classrooms, he shot and killed himself. Just before shooting himself, he posted a letter on Facebook saying he had been molested by a priest at the school and this was the reason he was taking his life by suicide. Staff and students throughout the school saw this post before it was removed.*

Let’s Remember Him Together *Through a student exchange program, a group of American students spent a summer with students in another country, and over the course of the summer they grew quite close. The students in the program stayed in touch through social media after that summer, and the connections continued. One of the students in the other country died the following year. Students in both countries set up a web-based memorial*

service. Across oceans, they were able to share stories of this boy they had all known and loved. It was a powerful way for them to honor his memory, share their grief and provide support to each other.

What Should I Do About This Post I Just Read? *A young woman in a college sorority returned to her parents’ home over a holiday break. She stayed updated about her classmates’ activities via Facebook. One day during the break, a sorority sister’s ex-boyfriend posted a distraught message saying his former girlfriend was suicidal and he didn’t know how to help her now that they had broken up. The young woman didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t close to the girl mentioned and didn’t have a way to make sure she was safe. She decided to contact the sorority’s faculty advisor. The advisor did have contact information for the girl’s parents. She reached them by phone, the girl at risk was located, an intervention was made, and a life may have been saved.*

These stories demonstrate how varied social media influences can be. Together, these examples reinforce the call for educators to learn effective ways to respond to a death in a student’s life or in the broader school community. Every education professional, not just school counselors, needs to know how to respond as students cope with these situations.

However, you also need to recognize that it’s distressing to be with grieving children. Their questions and comments can be particularly poignant. Although it’s rewarding to reach out and help children at such moments in their lives, it can also bring up memories of our own losses. This can be especially hard when we are currently going through difficulties ourselves. Keep in mind that it is OK to seek support from others or to hand over follow-up with a grieving student to a colleague if it becomes difficult for you. ☐

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