

## Supporting Youth In Grief

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from:

- **The truth** about what has happened. If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity and is essential for your credibility.
- **The opportunity to talk about the event** as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others have had similar experiences. Talking eases the pressure we feel inside.
- **Understanding that this event might be a "trigger"** that is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in past times of danger, loss, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual.
- **Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that those who** come from dysfunctional homes will likely have less ability to cope with grief.
- **Being allowed to use the Safe Room** even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on school work until they've had the opportunity to process the loss. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the Safe Room and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving process.
- **Finding meaning in the event.**
- **Help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students, asking about their experience with such services and, if appropriate, let them know what to expect with this one. (*See student handout on attending funerals later in this chapter.*)
- **Continued structure in the day's schedule.** It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school, where they can grieve with others. They usually benefit from the usual class schedule and the sense of routine. Suspend academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last 20 minutes or the whole class period; in others, all day. While the students need that flexibility in terms of having time out of academics to get back on their feet, the routine of school bells and class periods gives them a sense of some things still being predictable. Too much "looseness" furthers their sense of uncertainty.
- **Consistency in discipline, with flexibility.** Often at these times, students feel life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behaviors are not within the norm. Exceptions may be made in regard to expectations on academics, but sometimes, some students act out in order to feel a sense of control, which leaves others feeling unsafe or may actually endanger others. No student should be allowed to act out violently, aggressively or dangerously at all. Sometimes calling security to just be present will be enough without their actually approach the student. But all in the environment need to feel entirely safe in regard to the behaviors of others. Flexibility is warranted, as long as the relaxed discipline doesn't put people at risk or leave students feeling lost from lack of structure.

Students do **not** so much need for you to become an instant counselor, but rather to "be there for them." Let them talk about their fears and feelings. Help them feel safe and not judged. The first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions. Encourage students to:

- **Support each other**, helping one another get through the day.
- **Put extra energy into friendships.**
- **Take good care of themselves** by eating well and getting lots of rest.

## **For Students Attending Funerals**

*(A handout for students, or to be used to guide discussions)*

If you'll be going to a funeral or memorial service, it is helpful to have someone help you feel prepared. This flyer will give you some insights about what it might be like. You could take this to any adult you trust and talk it through.

### **Reasons to attend funerals:**

- Having an opportunity to say good-bye.
- Funerals and memorial services are our way of marking the passing of a human life.
- This is a social or public grief process that provides an opportunity to pay tribute, to share memories and to hear new things about the life of your friend or loved one.
- For many, grief has a spiritual dimension. Funerals provide the context for that connection.
- Gatherings provide group or mutual support of all who are sharing the loss.
- Funerals bring a sense of closure and signal the end of the "formal" period of grieving. This doesn't mean it is the end of grief, but rather is often a turning point.

### **Other thoughts:**

- Find out ahead of time what the facility is like -- whether it is in a church or funeral home, how the space might be decorated, what the seating will be like.
- Find out who is likely to be there - whether you will see family members of the person who died.
- Learn about who will officiate and the "order of things" one might expect during the service
- Whether the casket will be present at the service, whether it will be open, and if so, where in the building and when the viewing will occur.
- Decisions about viewings should be based on your own desires and not to satisfy others. It is permissible to touch the body, but be prepared that it will be cold.
- It is okay to leave the service quietly if you become uncomfortable; many people feel uncomfortable during funerals. Some may feel panic, anxiety, fear or acute sadness, which is not unusual. Although it *feels* dangerous, grief is just very uncomfortable and, for many, unfamiliar.
- There are a variety of ways to express condolences to family: sending cards and flowers, stopping by the house, sharing favorite memories or appreciations of your deceased friend, taking food, offering to do errands for the family, etc.
- It often feels awkward the first few times you talk with someone who is in profound grief, but families almost always appreciate genuine attempts to express sympathy. Here are some guidelines for talking with those who are profoundly bereaved:
  - Platitudes and explanations are usually not helpful (such as, "It was God's will;" "At least he didn't feel any pain;" or "He's in a better place.")
  - Helpful openers include:
    - "This is just so sad for all of us."
    - "This must be so difficult, I just can't imagine."
    - "I wish I knew something to say or do that could make you feel better."
    - "I don't know what to say, but I came because I care."
    - "I'll miss him (or her) so much."
    - "I'll never forget this one most wonderful part about who he/she was to me.... "
    - "We're thinking about you and are concerned about how you're doing."
    - And best of all, encourage them to share their favorite memories with you.

Be sure to find out what you have to do in order to be released from school to attend the service. The school may develop a standard permission slip that you need to bring back, signed by your parents. The Safe Room may be open following the funeral for those who need some time for decompression before returning to classes. And one last thought. Sometimes any of us can think that we understand how big this is for us, but when we get to the funeral or memorial service, it may suddenly feel much more real and overwhelming. Remember, you can quietly walk out and watch it through the door to give yourself a little more distance. You can walk around outside for a few minutes. Try not to be disruptive to those around you, but do what you need to do to take care of yourself. Choose supportive adults to sit near. Know that tears bring healing, and it is OK to cry.

## Recommendations for Youth

*(A guidelines for discussions with students.)*

We thought this might be a good time for all of us to think about how to get through the next day or two. Getting through the next few days of shock and grief may be especially difficult for some of us. But remember, we get through tough times together. By supporting one another and by taking good care of ourselves. Here are a few suggestions on how we can support each other.

Eat healthy food and try to get plenty of sleep. Take care of your body and your physical needs.

Put a little extra energy into friendships. Call each other more often for the next few days. If you had a good talk with someone today and want to reconnect, do so in whatever way makes the most sense – cell phone, at home or via email. Lots of you use Facebook and Twitter... use them, but think carefully about what you say and take care to be kind in your communications. Once words are out, we can't take them back. Sometimes social media easily encourages a bit of attitude or taking sides or blaming or other ways that can become hurtful. The key is to stay connected and take care of each other.

Let your parents know what today has been like. Tell them what you'd like from them. Let them know how they can support you.

Look for ways to support each other:

- Check in with each other.
- Spend more time together.
- Do some fun things, too. Take breaks from the grief.
- Let the school counselor know if there is someone you're concerned about.
- Go see the counselor if you're having a tough time -- especially if you're having nightmares, fears or thoughts that you just won't go away.
- There is a crisis hot line in *(your town)* , and the number is *(fill in)* . It is there for anyone who wants to talk about anything.

For those of you who go to the funeral...

It will be a *(church / graveside/ \_\_\_\_\_)* service. If outside, dress for the weather. *(Where will it be held? Will there be a viewing? Other information regarding this. Also see handout for students attending funerals, on the previous page.)*

If you want to take flowers or cards to the service, it is fine to do so. Even though it may feel awkward, when you are there it is helpful to speak, even if briefly, to the family. Saying that you feel bad about this, that you are sad, that you wish there were something you could do to make it better - any honest expression of how you are feeling is a fine thing to say. It is also fine to tell the family what one thing you admired or liked most about *(the deceased student or person)*. Share your favorite memory with them.

It's permissible, even admirable, to talk to family members rather than to avoid them. It is really difficult for family members to be left feeling isolated. It is OK that you may feel awkward. Step forward and introduce yourself, telling them what you'll miss most or what you most enjoyed about the person who is gone.

*(If the service is during the school day...)* If you are going to attend the service, remember to get a permission slip signed. Remember to check into your first period class and be excused from there. All students are expected to return to school after the service. If students feel the need to talk to someone tomorrow, *(the school counselor)* will be available.

## Crisis Day Guidelines For Teachers

Remember this! You don't have to become an instant counselor. Students simply need you to be there for them. They need time to explore the meaning of this death. Be consistent enough about discipline so there is enough structure for them to feel safe, but flexible enough for students to "breathe". Allowing them to see your grief is a gift and a model for expressing feelings.

A Flight Team member can read the death announcement to students if you'd prefer, but remain in the room so you can see students' reactions. After the announcement, do some processing. Share your own feelings. Avoid blame or guilt. Help students make "I" statements ("This is how it is for me," rather than, focusing on others.)

After the announcement you might mention to students that this will be a tough day for some, and that you expect all students to be responsible in their behavior and respectful toward others. Give examples, like: "When one person is speaking, all others need to listen" and "No teasing." Ask students to give other examples of being respectful and responsible. Then lead a discussion. Lead-ins might include:

- *Had some of you already heard about this? How did you hear?*
- *How many of you have lost others to death before this?*
- *Let's make a list of the kinds of reactions and feelings people have at times like this.*
- *What kinds of things have people said or done that were helpful for your families at times like this?*

Don't force students to talk, but be sure all who wish to speak have the opportunity. Realize the importance of truth. That can be difficult. If there are aspects that are inappropriate for students to hear, don't tell them a "cover" story. Be honest in saying that you aren't able to talk about that part at this time. Because students are thirsting for information, this sometimes makes them angry or frightened. It is OK to ask them how it is for them when they can't have all of the details. Validate their frustration. It is based in a very basic need to know. We really can't begin grieving effectively until we know enough to understand what it is we are grieving. Grief from a suicide is very different than grief from an accident. This is a good time to remember that you can't take away their pain. You can just be there for them.

Avoid being judgmental, giving advice or giving your own answers. Stick to the truth and then encourage students to explore the loss (their grief, their loss?) and come up with their own answers. These conversations may wax and wane during the day, so the day may be one of weaving back and forth between these discussions and academics.

Allow quiet time, time to write or draw pictures, as well as time for students to gather with peers to talk (in adult-supervised places) - reminiscing and memory-sharing, exchanging notions about death, funerals, etc., and talking about feelings they're experiencing. Accept the feelings, i.e., "It makes sense to me that you might feel that way." Realize that some students may have negative feelings about the deceased. Allow those feelings to be expressed, also. Support the honesty. If there are feelings of revenge toward others because of the nature of the death (i.e., a student was driving a car and a passenger-student died) caution students about the difference in acknowledging their feelings and taking action. Make clear that no matter how students feel, they are responsible for their behaviors. Allow the day to alternate between processing and academics as student needs seem to dictate.

Encourage students to use the Safe Room as needed. Getting the students who are most impacted to the Safe Room allows your class to return to normalcy more quickly. Get students out for recess - they need the break and the physical exercise. Help kids network. Give encouragement to those who wish to contribute to the Life Tribute. Participation on any level gives the Life Tribute much more meaning for kids, thus it meets a real need (for meaning, contribution and community) and provides a foundation for turning the corner or "moving on" when the formal grieving period is over.

In the coming weeks, watch for signs of depression or changes in attendance, academic performance or behavior. Refer students of concern to the counselor. Ask for breaks and take good care of yourself!

## Ways to Take Care of Yourself at Times of Loss

Talk to family or friends about how you are feeling and doing.

Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Write poetry.

Write letters of regrets and appreciations about anything in life.

Draw pictures. Get into art.

Play a game or sport. Get lots of exercise.

Listen to soothing music.

Listen to upbeat music and dance!

Snack on healthy foods. Take vitamins.

Enjoy a bubble bath.

Care for your pets and house plants.

Take a favorite stuffed animal to bed with you.

Read a favorite story.

Ask someone who loves you to read you a story.

Let yourself cry.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug.

Get lots of sleep.

Spend time in prayer or meditation.

Collect a favor from someone who owes you one!

Treat yourself to a massage.

Light a candle.

Sing loud.

Laugh. Rent a great, hilarious video. See a fun flick.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug!

## Signs of Need for Professional Help

After a school crisis, it is important to look at students to identify those who might need professional help. Following a death or tragedy, if a student or staff person's demeanor changes noticeably and remains so for a time, pay attention.

### Physical Signs:

- Changes in eating (more or less)
- Changes in sleeping
- Headaches, tummy aches
- Loss of caring about personal hygiene, appearance

### Emotional signs:

- Persistent anxiety
- Hope for reuniting with deceased
- Clingy
- Absence of grief
- Fear of attachments
- Appearing depressed or speaking of being depressed
- Voicing only the negative or positive of the deceased in a way that seems noteworthy

### Behavioral:

- Aggression or displays of power
- Withdrawal from others
- Overachieving
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Daydreaming
- Compulsive care-giver of others
- Accident prone
- Stealing, illegal activities, drug and alcohol abuse
- Inability to speak of deceased

### Cognitive:

- Inability to concentrate
- Confused or distorted thinking
- Memory loss
- Poor decision-making skills

Don't ignore your gut sense of how a child is doing. The above are indicators, but you know these kids. See what several others who know the child think.

Remember that what we observe is being filtered by our own history, cultural norms and beliefs. The best way to know what is going on with someone is to ask! Students are remarkably desirous of having someone who cares listen to them. Start by making a statement of observation. "You've looked depressed lately..." and just see how the student responds. "I just want to check in with you. It has been a really difficult time, and lots of us are struggling. I'm just wondering how you're doing?"

Confidentiality is an important thing to remember. We can talk about these students out of a place of caring and concern, but we must remember to guard their integrity and respect confidentiality.

We can often help families recognize changes in student behaviors and other signals that there is a need for help. Be sure to find out how to refer students both to school services and what the process is for referring families to outside agencies as well. Remember to keep a paper trail!

**Flight Team Evaluation  
(Safe Room and building-wide)**

School \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*(To be filled out by Flight Team members who responded to the school.)*

**About the Safe Room:**

What worked well?

What could be improved?

What about the room arrangement or environment was particularly helpful or could have been better structured another time?

Any other suggestions for future Safe Rooms? Other comments?

**And in general:**

How did things go in the classrooms?

Other areas of the school that needed staffing / support / attention?

What about efforts to support staff?

**And finally, lessons learned?**

Your name \_\_\_\_\_ Where you served \_\_\_\_\_

## Warning Signs of a Potentially Suicidal Student

*No single sign or group of signs rules in or out the possibility of suicide. If you see any of these signs don't deny or minimize the possibility. Don't hesitate to refer this child to your school counselor or call in professional help. Follow all district policy and document all steps taken. This is a liability issue, and assures the best attempt for appropriate help for the student.*

- previous attempts (single biggest indicator of a completed suicide to come)
- giving clues (90% of kids who suicide give many clues)
- make poor choices about safety (no seat belts, no condoms)
- hospitalized (especially for danger to self/others, for depression or other mental health issues or sometimes, ongoing critical or debilitating illness)
- long-term depression
- pre-occupation with death
  - listening to depressive or violent music, writes of these themes
- sometimes self-mutilation (but often this is an attempt to modulate internal anxiety)
- frequent crying spells
- withdrawn behaviors
- change in peer group
- rebellious
- increase in acting out behaviors
- loss of interest in usual activities
- talk about death
- may have experienced many losses within a short time
- hopeless/powerless/out of control language
- recent suicide of another
- increased physical symptoms
- giving away belongings
- no hope for future, no plans
- fatigue – loss of energy
- blames self for parents' divorce, a death, some event
- loss of hygiene, tidiness, organization
- changes in long-established patterns
  - they may be hoping someone will notice
  - may be having difficulty in concentration, thinking



## Needs of Students

The following will help students grieve and begin to adjust:

- An honest accounting of facts and relevant details.
- Some understanding of the biological aspects may be helpful.
- Understanding that the disease is not contagious; whether they are at risk.
- A sense of safety and security – stability of adults. Am I safe?
- Opportunity to verbally or actively process the event:
  - Talking, drawing pictures, listening to stories, hearing others talk.
  - To be actively involved in doing something helpful: cards for the family, planning a Life Tribute for school, etc.
- Opportunity to ask questions. They deserve respectful and honest answers.
- Time for this to sink in.
- To address issues or rephrase the same question again (and again, and again).
- To know how the family is doing, whether there will be a funeral, etc.
- To be able to grieve, with others, in the context in which the deceased was known.
- To express their feelings, share memories and cry together.
- For adults to model their feelings.
- Lots of reassurance. Students need their feelings and experience validated.
- An opportunity to say "good-bye".
- Encouragement to realize that love goes on. (Gone, but not forgotten.)
- Help understanding that pain eases over time as we process.
- Support from adults that going in and out of grief is fine -- that the intermittent experiencing of grief allows helpful breaks for fun and reprieve.
- Support their thoughts and feelings, expectation of appropriate behavior.
- Continued structure; maintain disciplinary code with some flexibility.
- Stable environment, predictable schedule (exceptions announced ASAP)

### **REMEMBER**

- Kids sense if something is wrong - NOT addressing it leaves FAR more for them to deal with later. It's best to do all you can do now.
- It is better to be honest about what you observe ("I can see you are scared") than to be artificially cheerful.

## Needs of Students

### The following will be helpful for students:

- An honest accounting of facts and relevant details.
- Some understanding of the biological aspects may be helpful.
- Understanding whether the disease was contagious; whether they are at risk.
- Sense of safety and security -- stability of adults. Is the world safe?
- Opportunity to verbally or actively process the event (talking, drawing pictures).
- Opportunity to ask questions, and respectful and honest answers.
- Time for this to sink in.
- To address issues again (and again, and again).
- To know how the family is doing, whether there will be a funeral, etc.
- Opportunities to be actively involved in doing something helpful.
- To be able to grieve where and with whom the deceased was known.
- To express feelings, share memories, cry together.
- Perhaps to repeat certain things or ask same the questions over and over.
- For adults to model having feelings.
- For reassurance, feelings and experience to be validated.
- DOING something; such as drawing, cards for family, planning the Life Tribute.
- May need an opportunity to say "good-bye".
- Assurance that love goes on. (Gone, but not forgotten.)
- Understanding that the pain eases over time as we talk and cry, that time plays an important role -- that they will not feel this way forever.
- Support from adults that going in and out of grief is to be expected.
- Support for their thoughts and feelings, expectation of appropriate behavior.
- Continued structure; maintain disciplinary code with some flexibility.
- Stable environment, predictable schedule (exceptions announced ASAP)
- The younger the child, the more concrete in reasoning.
- Children sense if something is wrong - NOT addressing it is leaving FAR more to deal with forever than doing what you really can do now.
- Better to be honestly reflective ("I can see you are scared") than artificially cheerful.
- Youth who have lost a parent to death have lost the remaining parent to grief; GIVE SUPPORT for a long, long time.
- Younger children tend to generalize concepts.
  - "Grandma died in a hospital - all who go to hospitals will die there."
  - Grandma died in her sleep - child fears own sleep.
  - Younger children tend to simply act out their grief - what does their behavior say?
  - Make statements of observation and reflection. "You look angry...."
- Create appropriate space and activity for them to act out anger, etc.
- Encourage them to play out a variety of outcomes, solutions, endings.
- They need both choices and limits.
- Younger children understand death as they experience it over time, as they realize the person is not coming back (the accumulated sense of "gone-ness").
- Do not give false reassurances, such as that no one else will die.
  - Be realistic. "We never know when someone will die, but having your mother die doesn't make your dad any more apt to die than he would have been otherwise. It just makes us FEEL so insecure. Let's talk more. How can we work together on this fear stuff?"

***If you are concerned that a child needs professional help, see Section D.***

## **REGARDING THE FUNERAL AND SURROUNDING ACTIVITIES**

- Children and youth need choices freely made based on truth. **Be honest!**
- It's better to say "I don't want to take you to the funeral home because I might be uncomfortable" than "You should stay home because it might be upsetting to you."
- They need to grieve as part of the family (if they are part of the family).
- At any age they can make an appropriate decision for themselves about seeing the body and attending the funeral, when they are supported by stable adults.
- Are dependent on the honesty and stability of their support people.
- Youth sense the depth of what has happened. Our honesty helps them feel safe.
- "Covering" on the part of the adults creates fears, and that disrupts trust.
- Children need information about funerals:
  - Where, when, what the building is like.
  - Where people sit, compare to church, auditorium, classroom.
  - Who will be there, what a service is like, who officiates.
- Where the family will be, whether there will be a casket, open or closed
- What they can do
  - Okay to touch or talk to the body
  - Okay to walk out a different exit if uncomfortable
  - It's okay to leave with someone during the service.
  - Feelings of panic, fear, anxiety are not unusual.
- Reasons why people go to funerals:
  - to say good-bye.
  - to support family.
  - sense of tradition.
  - spirituality/religious observance/experience.
  - time to relive memories - hear new things.
  - to "belong" at a time of abandonment.
- Kids need to be able to be with a clearly identified support person – someone who will walk out of the funeral with them if they need a breather.
- Need to know not to be afraid if others are overwrought - it isn't "contagious".
- Need to know that experiencing grief in "waves" is normal.
- Mention more elusive/unusual feelings or reactions such as:
  - Emptiness, "going crazy," "unreal-ness" vulnerability apathy, hopelessness, guilt.
- Talk about feelings of responsibility, unfinished business.
- Let them know that as grief gets processed, the sadness fades, and the treasured memories shine forth.

**DEATH OF PARENT FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCE:** Those who lose a parent to death after a divorce often do not have the support to grieve at home. The remaining parent may be ambivalent.

- Child may lose ties with half of extended family.
- Child may not be able to grieve in the "right" environment (the one of the loss).
- Child may have less opportunity to have treasures of non-custodial parent.
  - May not be able to be a part of the process of division of personal possessions.
- Much more apt to have discord among those whom the child sees as family.
- May not have support of remaining parent at funeral, death-related activities.

## Death, Serious Injury

*Any time a staff or student dies, it is essential that the school respond to student needs. Remember that all students who have recently lost someone else in their lives will be triggered back into any unfinished grief they have. Be open in hearing from staff regarding needs they see.*

If an incident occurs on school grounds:

- Call 911 and contact the building principal about the death or serious injury.
  - The principal or designee should contact others (superintendent, etc.)
  - School should work with police or first responders on notification of family. In cases of death, this should be a coordinated effort which includes school and official people.
  - If the Flight Team is wanted, contact the coordinator.
  - Refer to Crisis Day Checklist and your own district crisis response plan.
- If incident occurs away from school grounds, the principal or designated person confirms the information with the family of the deceased or with the police, depending upon circumstances.
  - If calling family, a possible opening statement might be:
  - "We have heard distressing news. We are calling to find out how we can best help you, and to have you help us decide what information we can give accurately to the student body and faculty."
  - Give the family time to talk... to tell the story... to sort through thoughts.
  - Request that when plans for a memorial or funeral are clear, that the school be informed.
- Consider having the principal or a designee make a home visit. Consider from the beginning the care that must be exercised in handling the deceased person's belongings. (See *sections B and I*)
- Refer to the checklist in the front of the manual and proceed.

## Suicide

*Suicide brings special needs and special challenges. There will be several different but identifiable reactions to the death. The greatest challenge for the district may be overcoming the temptation to play this down, to "get on with business", thus leaving many students in crisis. The best way to identify others at risk is to have a Safe Room.*

The administrator in charge should consider the following:

- Begin by verifying your information.
- Decide the best means of communicating with the family:
  - Express condolences personally and on behalf of the school.
  - Find out whether they are calling it a suicide. If not, what are they saying?
- In the announcement, it is wise to avoid identifying the death as a suicide for certain, as there are often times when, days later, the coroner's or investigator's report finds it may have happened unintentionally. This could be from a note found in the child's room that identifies it as an attempt, in order to get parent's attention. What you write in the announcement will be what goes to court if the family decides to make issue of how you reported the death. What students bring up in the discussion afterward is another matter. Use care in wording the announcement.
- It is critical to remember that the step number one for grieving is to know the circumstances of the death, so any time we are unable to speak of the cause of death openly, there is a primary psychological reason that students are struggling. Unknowns often breed fear and anxiety. Whatever you do announce, be truthful.
- In the discussion following the announcement, if you are unable to openly call it a suicide, it tends to stretch out the grieving period, because grief depends upon understanding the nature of the death. Clear and honest information is most helpful for the students in their grieving. It is always difficult when students really know that it is suicide, but you are unable to say so. The honest thing to tell students, at that point, is that the family does not wish to give out the cause of death, but it is helpful to then ask students what they have heard. At this point, although teachers don't necessarily need to confirm that it is a suicide (if that is what is suspected), they can at least openly talk with children on how difficult it is when we don't have all the facts or when details of the death are particularly painful for grievers:
  - "Many of you have information we may not have. Let's talk about what you've heard." Then initially let students bring up what they're hearing.
  - "Some of the information out there may be accurate, some may be rumor. What is it like for us when we don't have all of the facts, or when the circumstance of the death is particularly difficult?" At this point, the focus shifts from the cause of death to how we can grieve at times like this, when details are sketchy or difficult. We call this bridging from one focus to another. It can be done without ever confirming the students' perception of cause of death.
  - If there are any specific details in this situation which might bring about legal issues, be in contact with appropriate authorities with your concerns.
- Anticipate that the dynamics for the school and for students following this death will be more powerful than with most other kinds of deaths.
- Many people on your staff and students in the school have suicide in their family histories, but have been reluctant to ever talk about it, so you don't know who will be extra sensitive during this time.
- This is an opportunity to dispel myths, to overcome our tendency to sweep these things under the rug, and a time for staff to come together in a supportive way. Consider asking the advice of someone with experience in suicide in the school setting as you approach this.

## Dealing with a Suicidal Student

Responding to a suicidal student depends somewhat on the level of severity of the situation, but be aggressive in responding than let anything slide at all. If the student is gesturing (talking or taking non-lethal action) you have more time to make a plan than if there has been a serious attempt (behavior that is life-threatening). If you are dealing with gesture, immediately (as in that same day) involve the counselor, teacher and parent and help the family find professional counseling. ***If the student has the means (pills, a gun, razor blades) talk them into handing it over as long as you are not in danger or being threatened. Never leave them alone until they have been turned over to a competent mental health specialist skilled in issues of suicide.***

If the student has made a serious attempt, and it is on school grounds, call 911 if medical assistance or security is needed. Immediately inform the building principal, parent, superintendent, school counselor, etc.. Involve several people in making decisions, as these are difficult situations.

Provide assistance and referral information to parents.

Work with parents and your team to determine what information will be shared with student body, if any. This will depend on what students already know or saw.

Seek assistance from the Flight Team Coordinator regarding need for:

- Flight Team support to district
- Need for staff meeting to discuss issues -- take family's wishes into account as you work with staff and in the release of information.
- Determine means for students to express concerns, ask questions or talk about the event in appropriate settings (classroom, small groups, other). While it is important to respect family wishes at this time, it is also common that students know a great deal – often more than staff. While we need to monitor closely what information we release, we also need to make room for students to examine the painful aspects.

Additional concerns include:

- Monitoring other students at-risk for suicide. If concerned, **don't leave child alone.**
  - Clarify with staff steps to be taken if they are concerned about a potentially suicidal student. Staff should report suspicions to the counselor or building administrator. The counselor should determine by working with the student what the level of severity is, and should proceed accordingly. If the student is lower risk, family notification and referral to a mental health agency for formal assessment might be appropriate. For higher risk students, it may be essential to make arrangements for a safe transfer to an in-patient program.
  - Work closely with the family.
  - Once appropriate measures have been taken (student is in counseling, treatment, whatever) school and family should set up a plan for ongoing communication. Request that family sign a permission to exchange information between school staff and the student's community mental health worker.
  - Any time the school is responding to the needs of a suicidal student, any others who are also entertaining suicidal thoughts may experience their own symptoms more severely. It is essential that the school support staff in recognizing indicators of suicide and that an active referral effort be made for students at risk.

*It is important to realize that this is a stop-gap measure to be taken by schools which do not already have a working suicide prevention model in place. Based on this incident, it should be apparent that schools are at risk of losing students to suicide. Please contact the Flight Team to learn how you might implement a comprehensive suicide prevention program in your district.*

## Warning Signs of a Potentially Suicidal Student

*No single sign or group of signs rules in or out the possibility of suicide. If you see any of these signs don't deny or minimize the possibility. Don't hesitate to refer this child to your school counselor or call in professional help. Follow all district policy and document all steps taken. This is a liability issue, and assures the best attempt for appropriate help for the student.*

- previous attempts (single biggest indicator of a completed suicide to come)
- giving clues (90% of kids who suicide give many clues)
- make poor choices about safety (no seat belts, no condoms)
- hospitalized (especially for danger to self/others, for depression or other mental health issues or sometimes, ongoing critical or debilitating illness)
- long-term depression
- pre-occupation with death
  - listening to depressive or violent music, writes of these themes
- sometimes self-mutilation (but often this is an attempt to modulate anxiety)
- frequent crying spells
- withdrawn behaviors
- change in peer group
- rebellious
- increase in acting out behaviors
- loss of interest in usual activities
- talk about death
- may have experienced many losses within a short time
- hopeless/powerless/out of control language
- recent suicide of another
- increased physical symptoms
- giving away belongings
- no hope for future, no plans
- fatigue – loss of energy
- blames self for parents' divorce, a death, some event
- loss of hygiene, tidiness, organization
- changes in long-established patterns
  - they may be hoping someone will notice
  - may be having difficulty in concentration, thinking

## Murder

*This section addresses the murder of a student that occurs off school grounds. See the Catastrophic Events Resource Manual for shootings or other such events which occur during school and on school grounds.*

*Murder brings about fear on many levels for the students. If the perpetrator hasn't been caught, the fear is "Will I be next?" If the perpetrator has been caught, the fear might be, "Could someone I love turn crazy and murder me or someone else?" Murder strips kids of a feeling of safety that has likely been a given in their lives prior to now. It assaults their naiveté and flies in the face of a beloved childhood innocence. Students may be feeling guilt, thinking, "It should have been me. S/he was a better student (or a better friend, or whatever) than I am."*

Issues to address:

- Safety and security -- students need practical and realistic reassurance about their safety both at school and "in the world".
- Consider the need for someone trained in trauma to help assess needs
- Find out whether students are having nightmares or difficulty concentrating because their thoughts seem obsessed with the event.
- If students need trauma debriefings, **bring in someone trained in interventions specific to children and victims, not Critical Incident Stress Management.**
  - Be certain that groups to be debriefed are homogenous in regard to their to or learning of the event.
- Consider use of possible support people/contacts/resources:
  - Flight Team members most familiar with trauma
  - Police can clarify facts for kids, bringing a sense of security that all that can be done is being done
  - Bring in support rather than expecting too much of the building counselor
  - Consult with your Flight Team Leader
  - Consider use of people from mental health, youth services team, Children's Services Division, etc.

The central reassurance students need is that very few people get to a place that is "so extreme" that they commit murder, that this was a very unusual occurrence. This is **especially important** if the perpetrator was the child's parent or a family member. If THAT is so, many children who have experienced physical abuse in their homes may be agitated and anxious. They need to know what resources for them are at the school. Is the school counselor available? To whom can these children talk if they are worried that their parents are capable of such a thing?

It is helpful to suggest to teachers that if one of their students is acting out or agitated beyond what is "normal" for that child, realize that the agitation and acting out are possibly a cover for or an attempt to manage the fear that this will happen to him or her. Look for solid resources to help these students work this through, helping them separate out what is just fear and what is based in possibility and reality. Help them identify their network of support. Whom can they call when something in life seems out of control?

Consider involving your Mental Health, Children's Services Division or Youth Services Team workers or others who have expertise in child abuse.



## A Missing Child

*When a child is missing, there are a variety of possible circumstances that will influence needs in regard to the response. Think through elements that might not be noted below.*

**If the abductor is a known person** (such as an estranged or non-custodial parent) fears might include:

- Is my friend OK?
- Could someone I love tear my family apart like that?
- Am I safe?
- Will my parents keep my needs in mind instead of their own?
- How do I know if I can trust people I know, if his/her parent could do this?

**Reassurances might include:**

- Even though the child is probably missing his/her parent and classmates, s/he is in the care of someone who wants him/her very much, so s/he will likely not be harmed.
- Even though it is frightening at this point, often these parents are not able to keep hidden for very long. Family members and friends often know the places they are apt to go. The police will be investigating this kind of information.
- The police will work as hard as they can to help find this child. Any parent (or other person) who abducts a child will likely have charges pressed against them once they're caught.

**If the abductor is known to the child or the community** (such as a child care worker, teacher, person somehow familiar to the kids) concerns might include:

- Are adults dependable, "in their right minds"?
- Can I tell who is safe to trust, even when I know someone?

**Reassurances might include:**

- Very, very few people we see as providing care to children are like this
- We need to listen to our inner voice (gut sense) about whether someone feels safe to us

**If the abductor is unknown**, issues you may see could be:

- Kids will be less certain about who (in general) they can trust in the world
- Great loss of trust in safety of simply living in the world -- the feeling that dangerous people just come from out of nowhere, that they are always at risk or are possible targets

**Reassurances might include:**

- Using this as a teachable moment -- encourage kids to see that this is a time to examine what kinds of precautions we all must take to keep us all safe.

**If the abductor is still "at large"**, concerns might include:

- Am I safe? Will s/he get me next?
- What terrible fate has befallen my friend?
- Who will be next?

## Anticipatory Grief in the Classroom

*If you have a student in your classroom,  
or if you are assisting in a classroom in which the teacher has  
been diagnosed with a terminal illness, the following should be helpful.*

Explain and describe the illness and process:

- consider bringing in a nurse
- may use pictures, diagrams
- be certain to tell children that all of their questions are okay
- may do this when the terminally ill child is not in school, or you may ask the child if she/he would like to present that information to class

Allow the ill child to choose a support group of friends. Let these students meet together with a safe adult. Let the ill child voice how the rest could best support him/her. Have some gatherings of this group be "just for fun" and not focused on current changes or future potential losses. Be creative in how this group can meet the needs of the ill child as well as their own needs around grief and loss.

Call the Flight Team for guidance or suggestions if you like.

With parent permission, help the child hook up with other terminally ill children if you can.

Use films, books

- Always preview material first.
- Look for messages that you may want to address (If death is portrayed as similar to sleep, be certain to point out the differences in order to avoid kids having fears around sleep.)
- Have kids draw about what they found important in the film or book.
- Have a "check-in" time with all of the kids a couple of times a week (could be "rug time", could be journal writing) so that the ill child is not always being "different" by focusing on him/her. Do, however, be certain to check with that child on how the week has been, etc.
- Remember that families must continue to have some kind of hope, whether it is for a miracle cure, just one more remission, or a peaceful death. Keep comments honest and reality based on one hand, yet open to thoughts of hope on the other. It is not essential to validate the reality of the hope, but to validate people having those kinds of thoughts.
- Address "unfinished business" – this varies greatly with the age of the classmates. Write letters of "regrets and appreciations."
- As kids voice fears or concerns, take time to explore them at that point. Validate the feelings. Predict and prepare. Problem solve.

## When One Child Suffers a Loss

*This is for times when a child misses school due to a family death or tragedy. Bringing together the teacher and counselor can be very effective in planning and responding.*

When the school receives news that a student needs to be told of a death, several considerations arise. It may not be obvious to the family in the midst of shock and grief, but it is far more helpful for the student to receive bad news from a family member or close friend than from a school staff member. Ask whether the family wants the student called to the office so that someone could come and get the student and convey the news at that time, but try to involve people beyond school to support the student.

If the situation requires that school staff inform the student, take the time to consider what staff person has the closest relationship with that student to do this.

Consider connecting a few of the student's closest friends with the school counselor in order for them to hear what happened and to gain some ideas about how they can be supportive to their friend.

**With some coaching, peers can be very helpful upon the return of their friend.** Here are some suggestions to share with them:

- Before your friend returns, you may want to reach out. Making cards or writing a note is one way. If you know the person who has died, write about something positive you think that person brought to the world, or an attribute you respect. Call just to say, "I'm thinking about you and want to be the best friend I can be for you now and when you return to school."
- Although it may seem uncomfortable, your friend would likely rather you talk about the loss than avoid the subject. There are no magic words that will take away the pain...it is most important to be a great listener. Just let your friend know you are willing to "be there" for him or her. Ask what would be helpful.
- It is not a personal affront to you if you reach out to your friend and s/he "shuts down" the conversation and doesn't want to talk about it. Grief is a very personal process, and we can't guess what a friend might want or need. Let him/her know of your emotional availability and see what happens.
- Some good openers for peers might be:
  - "I'm really sorry about your dad's death. I'm not sure what to say or do to help you, but I'm thinking about you a lot."
  - "I just wanted you to know that I'm feeling sad for you."
  - "I'm not sure if you want to talk about it or not, but either one is OK with me."
  - "I'm available at recess if you want to (offer an activity)"
- Let students know that grief is different for everyone, and that we can't guess how the student will be or will handle school for sure. This is a time for us to all be sensitive, caring and compassionate...but this student is still the same kid! Students sometimes talk about it feeling strange to return and have people treat them like they've changed. Along with this, returning students and their peers need to know it is OK to do all the old fun stuff and horse around. Let the grieving student set the pace or choose the activity at first.

## Some Thoughts From Terminally Ill Adults

### *The following is from the American Cancer Society -- Hospice*

*When someone we know is facing an illness, especially a serious illness, we often feel helpless. We stammer the weak phrase: "Just call me if you need something." Have you gotten a call lately? Here are practical tips to really help someone facing an illness – from people who have been there.*

- Don't avoid me. Be the friend...the loved one you've always been.
- Touch me. A simple squeeze of my hand can tell me you still care.
- Call me to tell me you're bringing my favorite dish and what time you are coming. Bring food in disposable containers so I won't worry about returns.
- Take care of my children for me. I need a little time to be alone with my loved one. My children also need a little vacation from my illness.
- Weep with me when I weep. Laugh with me when I laugh. Don't be afraid to share this with me.
- Take me out for a pleasure trip, but know my limitations.
- Call for my shopping list and make a "special" delivery to my home.
- Call me before you visit, but don't be afraid to visit. I need you. I'm lonely.
- Help me celebrate holidays (and life!) by decorating my hospital room or home, or bringing me tiny gifts of flowers or other natural treasures.
- Help my family. I am sick, but they may be suffering. Offer to come stay with me to give my loved ones a break. Invite them out. Take them places.
- Be creative. Bring me a book of thoughts, taped music, a poster for my wall, cookies to share with my family and friends . . . an old friend who hasn't come to visit me.
- Let's talk about it. Maybe I need to talk about my illness. Find out by asking me: "Do you feel like talking about it?"
- Don't always feel we have to talk. We can sit silently together.
- Can you take me or my children somewhere? I need transportation to a treatment . . . to the store . . . to the doctor.
- Help me feel good about my looks. Tell me I look good, considering my illness.
- Please include me in decision making. I've been robbed of so many things. Please don't deny me a chance to make decisions in my family, in my life.
- Talk to me of the future. Tomorrow, next week, next year. Hope is so important to me.
- Bring me a positive attitude. It's catching.
- What's in the news? Magazines, photos, newspapers, verbal reports, keep me from feeling the world is passing me by.
- Could you help me with some cleaning? During my illness, my family and I still face dirty clothes, dirty dishes, and a dirty house.
- Water my flowers.
- Just send a card to say "I care".
- Pray for me and share your faith with me.
- Tell me what you'd like to do for me and, when I agree, please do it!
- Tell me about support groups so I can share with others.

## Handling a Class When a Student or Staff Member Dies

**Helpful guidelines** for leading a classroom through a loss:

- Gather together and read the announcement.
- Ask what they know - clarify facts. Discussion might include:
  - ***“How many of you had already heard about \_\_\_\_’s death before you got to school today? What did you hear?”*** (Let students respond. Don’t necessarily clarify or correct each detail as kids speak; let the respond, then gently bring the discussion back to the facts and trying to make sense of it.)
  - ***“This is what we’ve been told by \_\_\_\_\_.”*** (Clarify facts.)
  - ***“We all have lots of different kinds of reactions and feelings at times like this. What are some of yours?”*** (Let them tell you about that for awhile.)
  - ***“Maybe some of you are thinking about others in your lives who have died.”*** (Let them share a few of their experiences with family deaths.)
- Thank them for sharing and then relate what will happen next. (Give details of funeral arrangements, school plans, other details.)
- Allow more discussion, perhaps ask what we might do for the family.
- ***“Sometimes kids want to write letters or make cards or write poems. Would any of you like to do something like that?”***

You might talk about how some kids are emotionally more impacted by death than others, and that this is a time for everybody to practice respect and responsibility, and that this is a time to learn about and practice empathy.

### **Some suggestions:**

- Be a role model for expression of feelings. Share your own reactions with the class.

## Needs of Students

- An honest accounting of facts and relevant details.
- Some understanding of the biological aspects may be helpful.
- Understanding that the disease is not contagious; whether they are at risk.
- A sense of safety and security – stability of adults. Am I safe?
- Opportunity to verbally or actively process the event:
  - Talking, drawing pictures, listening to stories, hearing others talk.
  - To be actively involved in doing something helpful: cards for the family, planning a memorial activity for school, etc.
- Opportunity to ask questions. They deserve respectful and honest answers.
- Time for this to sink in.
- To address issues or rephrase the same question again (and again, and again).
- To know how the family is doing, whether there will be a funeral, etc.
- To be able to grieve, with others, in the context in which the deceased was known.
- To express their feelings, share memories and cry together.
- For adults to model their feelings.
- Lots of reassurance. Students need their feelings and experience validated.
- An opportunity to say "good-bye".
- Encouragement to realize that love goes on. (Gone but not forgotten.)
- Help understanding that pain eases over time as we process.
- Support from adults that going in and out of grief is fine -- that the intermittent experiencing of grief allows helpful breaks for fun and reprieve.
- Support their thoughts and feelings, expectation of appropriate behavior.
- Continued structure; maintain disciplinary code with some flexibility.
- Stable environment, predictable schedule (exceptions announced ASAP)

### **REMEMBER**

- Kids sense if something is wrong - NOT addressing it leaves FAR more for them to deal with later. It's best to do all you can do now.
- It is better to be honest about what you observe ("I can see you are scared") than to be artificially cheerful.

## Signs That a Child Needs Professional Help

*This is a handout for parents and school staff.*

Any of these signs may initially be present in a person's grief... pay attention if these persist over time. If you are concerned about a child, talk with the school counselor and his or her parents to see if they are seeing the same signs. Try not to overstate your case. Most parents will welcome the honest observations and concern. It is helpful to have a list of resources for them, should they concur and wish to seek professional help.

### Physical Signs:

- Changes in eating (less or more).
- Changes in sleep (less or more).
- Significant loss of energy.
- Nausea.
- Headaches.
- Stomach aches.
- Somatic complaints

### Emotional Signs:

- Persistent anxiety.
- Hopes of reunion with deceased.
- Desire to die.
- Clinging to others.
- Absence of all grief.
- Strong resistance to forming new attachments.
- Expression of only negative or only positive about the deceased.

### Behavioral Signs:

- Aggression, displays of power.
- Withdrawn, regression.
- Overachieving syndrome.
- Inability to focus or concentrate.
- Self destructive.
- Excessive daydreaming.
- Compulsive care-giving.
- Accident-prone.
- Stealing, other illegal activities.
- Use/abuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Unable to speak of the deceased.

### Cognitive Signs:

- Inability to concentrate.
- Confused or distorted thinking.

Any signs of long-term, or clinical, depression are red flags. Pay attention to your own "gut feelings" about whether a child is struggling with more than just the profound sadness that typifies "normal" grief.

## Regarding Funerals and Surrounding Activities

There isn't an age before which children should not attend funerals, or after which they should. Children can often decide better for themselves about this matter than anyone else.

A critical factor is whether the child will have stable adults to rely upon (though perhaps also grieving) versus adults who are apparently falling apart. If stable adults provide adequate support, it is more likely that the children will make a decision for themselves that is fitting. Here are some other factors:

- Kids need choices freely made based on truth.
- If true, it's better to say "*I don't want to take you to the funeral home because I might be uncomfortable*" than "*It's best that you stay home because it might be upsetting to you.*"
- Kids need to grieve as part of the family.
- Kids at any age can make an appropriate decision about seeing the body and attending the funeral, as long as there's appropriate adult support.
- They are dependent on the honesty and stability of their support people.
- Kids sense the depth of what has happened.
- Honesty exhibited by adults helps them feel safe.
- Covering up by adults creates fears, and this disrupts trust.

It is helpful to give them information to demystify the experience they're about to witness, such as:

- Where and when the funeral will be; what the building is like.
- Where people sit, how it is like or unlike a church, auditorium or classroom.
- Who will be there; what a service is like and who officiates.
- Where the family will be; whether there will be an open or closed casket.
- What they can do.
- That it's okay to touch or talk to the body, but that it will be cold to the touch.
- That it's okay to walk out a different exit if they're uncomfortable.
- It's okay to leave with someone during the service.
- Feelings of panic, fear, anxiety are not unusual for kids *or* adults.



## Ways to Take Care of Yourself at Times of Loss

Talk to family or friends about how you are feeling and doing.

Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Write poetry.

Write letters of regrets and appreciations about anything in life.

Draw pictures. Get into art.

Play a game or sport. Get lots of exercise.

Listen to soothing music.

Listen to upbeat music and dance!

Snack on healthy foods. Take vitamins.

Enjoy a bubble bath.

Care for your pets and house plants.

Take a favorite stuffed animal to bed with you.

Read a favorite story.

Ask someone who loves you to read you a story.

Let yourself cry.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug.

Get lots of sleep.

Spend time in prayer or meditation.

Collect a favor from someone who owes you one!

Treat yourself to a massage.

Light a candle.

Sing loud.

Laugh. Rent a great, hilarious video. See a fun flick.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug!

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH

*This is only a general guideline - the differences in ages and stages of development factor into how children perceive and understand death. Development varies.*

### UNDER 3 (preverbal)

- No language to attach to thoughts/experience -- greatest need is for immediate bonding to new support.
- **AGES 3 - 6 (magical thinking)**
- May believe she or he caused the death somehow (superstition, deep guilt feelings).
- Associates death with past events. (i.e. *Grandma died in the hospital, so everyone who goes to the hospital will die there.*)
- Experiences grief in brief spurts, but sometimes heavily.
- Denies the finality of death. (i.e. *Mom will come back for my birthday.*)
- Often forgets the person has died.
- Fears loss and abandonment by remaining parent.
- Sees death as a gradual change in state (a leaf may be "more dead" than a toaster).
- Usually has little or no fear about pain and distress for the deceased.
- May not be open to reason re: the cause of death -- often "determine" facts for themselves.
- Sees death as caused by external forces (retaliation, strife).
- **AGES 6 - 9 (concrete reasoning)**
- Tends to personify death (grim reaper, death dropper, angel of death).
- Superstitious, lots of ghost stories, use of sayings (Step on a crack, break your M's back.)
- Associate death with non-movement (the dead can't talk, move, walk).
- Begin to explore concepts of death relative to family ("*Some day my mom will die.*").
- May experience sadness in anticipation of deaths that are not "rationally" imminent.
- Believe it will happen to others, not themselves.
- Move away from magical thinking toward grasping concepts of finality and irreversibility.
- Around six, may have fascination with death and killing.
- Around eight, may have morbid fascination with death rituals, also have dreams of death and resurrection (not specific to Christian beliefs, but through all cultures).
  - Material facts around death may seem funny – may laugh inappropriately.
- **AGES 9 - 12 (abstract thinking)**
- More realistic sense of death -- often pervasive fear of it.
- Feels death is sudden and unpredictable - fear of painful death, poisoning, falling.
- Begin to realize universality of death.
- Fear of "the void" following death -- inanimate suspension.
- Fascination with the physiology -- want to view body, ask "intrusive" or insensitive questions.
- **ADOLESCENCE**
- Grows increasingly closer to adult views, experiences.
- Can begin to be philosophical in viewing death.
- May idealize the deceased, especially if a friend, sibling or parent.
- May experience conflict - needing to be more independent (appropriate for developmental stage) while needing family support during crisis and grief.
- Greatest fears are of separation and non-existence.

## WHAT STUDENTS NEED IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY

- **Honest answers:** Grief cannot truly begin without first understanding the circumstances of someone's death. Consider how differently you would feel if a loved one was killed in an unavoidable accident, versus a reckless incident, a homicide or a suicide. Our experience of grief depends upon the circumstances of the loss, and **truth** is the information to give children on such occasions. The variable is the amount of detail you decide to give and how you frame the incident. It is not advisable to give gory or frightening details. But if a child asks about information you are choosing to withhold, be honest about not being able to talk about that rather than lying. It's important to respect their integrity, to establish and maintain trust.
- **Reality checks:** The reality of the death will sink in at different rates for different children. Because of disbelief, a common initial response to tragedy, it may be necessary for adults to repeat details of the event until the children really grasp it.
- **A variety of ways to share memories:** Some students will want to talk about their favorite memories of the person who has died. Some will do better drawing pictures, doing collages or writing a letter to the family. When leading classroom discussion about the loss, or encouraging writing and drawing, it may be wise to focus them on their regrets and appreciations about this person. With younger children, use simple language to define the meanings of regret and appreciation. This is an essential part of grief work.
- **A means to say good-bye:** We grieve in the environment of the loss... that means that children may not be able to grieve at home, because parents likely didn't know the deceased. For youth to cope with the loss, they need a period of grieving as well as structure for moving beyond grief. Allowing students to plan Life Tributes is remarkably helpful. See the section on Life Tributes (**Section G**). These activities help children internalize that, while the formal period of grieving may come to closure, it *in no way* suggests that individuals are over their grief.
- **Reassurance:** The younger the student, the more there may be need for reassurance. When one person dies, it is not uncommon for children to generalize, fearing that other special people will die in the same way. Rather than promise children that another person won't die, merely acknowledge that it's common to have that fear, even though it's unlikely that this kind of death will soon happen to anyone else we know. **Of course**, if the tragic event is one in which you anticipate other deaths to follow, be honest about that. Above all, be honest without promising about things over which we have no control.
- **No comparisons:** It is not helpful to idealize the person who has died. If students (or staff) are painting the deceased as a superhuman angel of some sort, it is helpful to point out that she or he was human like the rest of us, with strengths and weaknesses. Help them realize that the

## Signs That a Child May Need Professional Help

Any of the signs, below, may be initially present in grief. Pay attention if these persist over time. If you are concerned about a child, talk with the school counselor and/or the student's parents to see if they are seeing the same signs. Try not to overstate your case. Most parents and school staff will welcome the honest observations and concern. It is helpful to have a list of resources for them, should they concur and wish to seek professional help.

### **Physical Signs:**

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### **Emotional Signs:**

- Persistent anxiety.
- Hopes of reunion with the deceased.
- Desire to die.
- Clinging to others.
- Absence of all grief.
- Strong resistance to forming new attachments.
- Expression of only negative or only positive things about the deceased.

### **Behavioral Signs:**

- Aggression, displays of power.
- Withdrawn, regression.
- Overachieving syndrome.
- Inability to focus or concentrate.
- Self destructive.
- Excessive daydreaming.
- Compulsive care-giving.
- Accident-prone.
- Stealing or other illegal activities.
- Use or abuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Unable to speak of the deceased.

### **Cognitive Signs:**

- Inability to concentrate.
- Confused or distorted thinking.

Any signs of long-term or clinical depression are red flags, as are your own "gut feelings" about whether a child is really struggling with more than just the profound sadness that typifies "normal" grief.

## SCHOOL-WIDE MANAGEMENT IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

Because trauma differs fundamentally from grief, specific considerations are warranted in order to satisfy the needs of the student body as well as for overall school management purposes.

**Group hysteria**, or students emotionally "feeding off" each other, is common. Management of this relies on calm leadership and consistency in discipline, but with flexibility. This is not a time to make major exceptions regarding expectations of student behavior.

**Rumor control** requires having one person who clears and verifies information. Encourage students to report rumors directly to that person and discourage them from spreading rumors. Assure them you will get back to them with the truth as soon as possible.

**Model calmness. Reiterate** that action is being taken to return things to normal. Take appropriate steps, keep students informed of these steps and organize immediate activities which begin to address the turmoil. Observable action, like cleaning up the school damage, signals to students that progress is underway. This brings about a sense of confidence and calm.

**Students will not go back to learning** until they feel safe in the school environment. Talking about their reactions is part of that process. So, too, is being told that the event is not likely to recur or that the perpetrator has been apprehended, if those kinds of things are true. These kinds of statements are helpful in creating feelings of safety.

**Help students gain a sense of what is yet to come.** A key element in traumatic events people feeling out of control, and losing a sense of predictability. Do whatever you can to restore a sense of security and predictability.

**"Normalize" for people the usual reactions to trauma.** It is not unusual for people to have physical, emotional and cognitive symptoms to traumatic events. Often, people think they are going crazy or "losing it". Knowing that their reactions are common can make them feel better, less apt to equate their symptoms with loss of mental stability. Do not speak of their reactions as being "normal", however, use the term "not unusual" or "not uncommon" instead. It minimizes their sense of overwhelm to tell them their reactions are normal.

**Give students and staff opportunity for putting words to their reactions and fears.** Moving the experience from the memory center to the language center of the brain begins to give a sense of mastery over catastrophic events and overpowering emotions. It is helpful to be able to tell their stories, even if the listener is not a professional, but simply someone who is stable and calm.

**Find the means to allow for personal action.** We sometimes feel less immobilized if we are able to take some kind of corrective action, even if it is minimal. Although it may be dangerous for students to be involved in cleaning up debris, there may be other errands or tasks which would be appropriate for them.

**Do not have peer helpers or other student organizations be involved in leading discussions for students.** That's like having the walking wounded help the newly injured. All students need to be supported and not be expected to provide support to others. Besides, these kinds of events are overwhelming to nearly everyone and are beyond the scope of what student self-help program training addresses.

## SOME HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOLLOWING TRAUMA

(A handout for middle and high school students and adults.)

Traumatic reactions are common for those witnessing or surviving events outside our usual reality. It is different than grief. With grief, you are struggling with the *feelings and emotions* of personal loss. With trauma, you needn't know those involved in the crisis to have a strong reaction. While strong emotions may accompany a traumatic event, *they are primarily in response to your thoughts and memories*. Trauma is more psychological or brain-centered. Grief is more emotion or heart-centered.

Witnessing a traumatic death, doing CPR on an accident victim, being on the scene of a fire... all of these experiences might result in a traumatic reaction. Your brain decides to lock in the memory of the event because it is too much to deal with all at once. But then in the following days, your brain may bring it back over and over, *so that you'll try to deal with it*. But when it comes up, your body gets anxious again and you feel like it is actually happening.

Part of what drives the traumatic response for us is the biochemistry in our bodies. When our lives are in the balance, our bodies mobilize adrenaline and other chemicals that allow us to fight for our lives or flee. One of the reasons we have such a difficult time relaxing after a traumatic event is that with each vivid memory of it, our bodies think we could be in danger again and mobilize all of that biochemistry. The reaction to those chemicals is one of feeling anxious, on edge and easily provoked.

Here are some things that might help you:

- Realize that these feelings may surface over the next weeks or months. If so, find someone safe to talk with, and to vent, someone non judgmental, empathetic and able to validate your feelings. BUT! You must still be responsible for your actions; if you're feeling anger, vent it appropriately. Refrain from acting out in any way that could be harmful or cause injury to you or others.
- Sometimes when feeling traumatized or shaken, we doubt our relationships. This is an important time to work at reaffirming relationships with family and friends.
- If there are teachers or friends in whom you feel trust, let them know they've been helpful in your life. Let them know what they've done that has been helpful for you.
- It is important to restore a sense of safety and community at the school. Invest in activities and school spirit. Make this a time of pulling together in a positive way.
- When traumatized, some wish we were younger or older (when things seemed safer and our parents seemed able to protect us or, conversely, thinking that if we were more mature we could take better care of our fears). It's helpful to remember that this is a common response to trauma. Acknowledge the feelings and take care of yourself.
- As the initial shock of the trauma begins to wear off, many experience a roller coaster - feeling *nothing* and then a *cascade of feelings*. If we continue talking about fears and frustrations, this will level out as we integrate the event into life's greater context.
- At times, when our emotions are still erratic, it can be difficult to concentrate in school or at work. This, too, will subside as we mend.
- Having clear information is helpful in putting an event into perspective. But, media coverage of the event and ongoing legal proceedings may trigger recurring feelings. This is not unusual. It will be helpful to talk it out again...and again.
- Tragedies often make us feel like life has somehow changed forever, leaving us less

## IF A LOVED ONE HAS SUFFERED TRAUMA

*(Info for family and friends of those who have suffered a traumatic event)*

Exposure to traumatic events leaves people with a variety of distressing reactions. Many fall into a category called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Here are suggestions to make this difficult time easier for someone you know who has been traumatized.

Traumatic memories are different than other memories. In life-threatening or terrifying situations, the brain triggers a release of adrenaline. Fear is the emotional sensation that accompanies adrenaline release. The cognitive reaction to that release is heightened sensory awareness (sight, smell, etc.) Physically, we experience increased energy and stamina. During this "rush," many have a warped sense of time and confused thoughts. Later, memory of major aspects of the incident may be vague or skewed.

After the danger is past, people usually go into shock. During this short time, keep them safe, as they may inadvertently do something that might put them in harm's way.

It's important to quickly bring in a pro, trained in the psychology of trauma, so that people can be interviewed and receive interventions. This is a specific process, quite **different for victims than it is for first responders** (911 helpers).

Even after trauma victims have been a part of an intervention, it will take some time for things to return to normal. Traumatized people's experience makes them feel they've lost control of their lives, their sense of trust in the world, their ability to feel safe and even their ability to manage thoughts. Flash-backs can make them feel they're re-experiencing the trauma, resulting in rapid heart rate, immobilizing fear and other reactions like the event produced. Flash-backs and nightmares can undermine their sense of control, so they may want to suddenly control things which were unimportant to them before. A state of hyper-vigilance might ensue, where they're unable to relax, have interrupted sleep and appear to over react to normal daily stimuli (door slam, etc.). They may have a feeling of impending danger, even when safe. These are signs that the person is still traumatized and would likely benefit from professional help. Without it, people are at risk of substance abuse to manage the pain, confusion, overwhelm and anxiety. Sleep deprivation often results and the long-term detrimental effects are numerous. In the midst of this, however, give them every opportunity to make their own decisions wherever appropriate.

When someone has been traumatized, nearly everyone who loves them has a piece of advice. Hearing advice from others can feel like further loss of control, rather than love or support. Try reframing your advice as a statement of concern. Instead of saying, "You've got to take care of yourself and eat well," try: "I'm concerned about your health. I've brought you some of your favorite BBQ chicken in case you're hungry. I feel better when I can do something for you."

Here are additional things to try or to say:

- *How can I help?*
- *Is there anything I could do to take off some of the load? (Laundry? Cooking? Anything at work? Take the kids for dinner so you have some time alone?)*
- *If you're having trouble sleeping, would you like someone with you at night?*
- *Would it help if I went with you to... (court appearances, follow-up meetings with police, doctors, whatever)*
- *What is it you wish others understood about how this is for you?*