Student or Staff Death Response Manual

Freeport School District #145

Adapted by:

Christine Hodges, Professional School Counselor
Danielle Jackson, LPC
Tarica Jackson, School Social Worker
Amanda Collins, LCSW
Morgan Frost, Professional School Counselor
Amy Larson, LCSW
Amara Rafiq, School Counselor
Amy Riehle, LCSW

In consultation with:

Jeannette Diddens, LCSW
Kelly Lowy, MA, AMFT, QMHP, CFLE
Katie Ries, Professional School Counselor
Sara Shockey, Professional School Counselor
Katie Szarzynski, LCSW

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Foreword

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

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

Report of Death

When any individual within a school becomes aware of the death of a student, staff member or someone who works in the school community, it is the responsibility of that individual to immediately notify the principal and inform him/her of all the known facts regarding the death.

Annual Planning Phase

District-level

- ☐ Administrator from the Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) Department meets with Central Office staff to review Crisis Manual
- ☐ PPS Director presents Crisis Manual at principal's meeting

Building-level

- ☐ Each building should appoint members to a building-level Crisis Management Team. This should typically include building administration, counselors, nurse, dean, school social worker, administrative assistants, school psychologist, behavior support specialist, family resource coordinator, security staff, etc.
- ☐ Organize a calling tree for Crisis Management Team members and all staff
- ☐ Hold a staff meeting to review crisis protocol procedures at least annually

Roles & Responsibilities

Crisis Management Team Members

- Superintendent
- Director of Pupil Personnel Services
- Building Administrators
- Deans
- School Counselors
- School Social Workers
- Family Resource Coordinators
- School Nurses
- School Resource Officers
- Administrative Assistants
- Behavior Support Specialists

Superintendent

The Superintendent is vital to the implementation of the sudden death response plan. The Superintendent publicly shows support for school and community intervention in crisis situations.

- ☐ If the Superintendent is the first to learn of the death, the Superintendent shall notify the building principal and the Board of Education.
- ☐ A plan is made for the building principal to reach out to the family to gain factual information and verify what details are OK to share.

- [ ] Inquire about any requests the building principal may have in order to best be able to respond to this traumatic event.
- [ ] The Superintendent, in collaboration with PPS Administrator, meets with staff to initiate a crisis response plan and informs, as necessary, other building principals, other district staff including transportation, and the Board.
- [ ] Brief the administrative assistant and communication specialist in the Superintendent's Office in handling calls and requests for information.
- [ ] Act as a contact person to the media or designate a person to act in that capacity.
- [ ] When appropriate, extend condolences to the immediate family and provide appropriate representation at services.
- [ ] Receives updates on implementation of supports provided .
- [ ] Discuss specific requests of the building principal in order to respond to the traumatic event.
- [ ] Meet with staff to initiate a crisis response plan.
- [ ] Communicate with other district personnel and the board of education.
- [ ] Keep the board of education informed.
- [ ] Monitor the intervention process.

Principal

- [ ] Verifies the facts concerning the death; including who has died.
- [ ] Reach out to the superintendent to inform of the death.
- [ ] Reach out to the family with condolences and to find out what is ok to share with the school community. This is especially important in cases of death by suicide. If the death was by suspected suicide, the parents may not acknowledge or be in agreement with the coroner's finding which they have a legal right to challenge.
- [ ] Ask the parents about pictures and other school-related articles to be used for the student's funeral. Determine with the parents who will be the family contact for the school. Recognize that this may be the first of several visits. The parents likely will be in a state of shock.
- [ ] Convenes the school Crisis Management Team by email and by personal cell phone.
- [ ] Implements an all call to all staff in the building.
- [ ] Inform administrative assistants of how to handle calls related to the crisis.
- [ ] Arrange for substitutes where needed in the building.
- [ ] Hold a staff meeting to inform staff and discuss necessary support for staff and students.

- [ ] Hold an after-school staff meeting, when necessary
- [ ] Meet with the Crisis Management Team at the end of day to review the day's activities, review list of "high-risk" students, and plan for next day's activities.
- [ ] Keep Central Office staff informed.
- [ ] Designate a counseling support center in the building.
- [ ] (Any additional comments from the family that have been passed on to the principal might be shared at this point.) It may be appropriate for the classroom teachers to deliver the messages of thanks to the students for the support they have given to each other.

Administrative Assistant

- [ ] Meet with the Administrative team for directives on statements to be used when fielding school phone calls.
- [ ] Ensure all messaging/calls, etc. are consistent. (sample scripts in appendix)
- [ ] Refer all media requests to the Superintendent's office.
- [ ] No memorials are to be accepted inside the building or on site.
- [ ] Help with all communication as directed by the principal on the intercom, copies/letters, social media, Schoology, etc.
- [ ] Assist in removing the student from all student information systems and mailing lists, etc.
- [ ] Maintain communication with administration and the crisis management team leader.
- [ ] Put calls from the family through to administration or crisis management team leader.
- [ ] Remove locker contents from the deceased student's locker(s).

Crisis Team Leader

- [ ] Contact previous schools where the student attended (or where there may be siblings; relatives or close friends) and verify they received support for those students or teachers affected.
- [ ] List the teachers and staff who will need extra support because of their closeness, etc. to the deceased student.
- [ ] Maintain a list of "high risk" students.
- [ ] Organize the building's counseling efforts including grief group(s) and community support (FHN, New Horizons, Pastors, etc.).
- [ ] Assist in identifying students who were absent and "high risk".

- [ ] Assess for students who need to go home or have parents notified with possible referral to additional community mental health resources.
- [ ] Assist in organizing the staff's role in funeral arrangements including visitation.
- [ ] Meet with the Crisis Management Team at the beginning of day, if needed, and end of day to update and plan for the next day's activities.
- [ ] Attend staff meetings, as appropriate, before and after school. At the after school meeting, collect names of any additional students that need follow up and plan for the next day.
- [ ] Ensure that the following take place at the Crisis Management Team Meeting:
    - [ ] Review all students on "high risk" list and assign Crisis Team Members for follow up.
    - [ ] Designate a staff member to the classroom where assistance by the teacher has been requested.
    - [ ] Designate a counseling support center in building.
    - [ ] Designate a staff member to review the student's cumulative folder and notify other school principals as needed.
    - [ ] Help decide how to inform students regarding the death.
    - [ ] Decide with the team the best way to inform parents/students depending on the situation. For example: all call, email, letter, or a combination regarding the death.
    - [ ] Designate a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information.
    - [ ] Inform students/staff regarding funeral arrangements as appropriate.
    - [ ] Coordinate continued conversations with the family.
    - [ ] Communicate to staff how students who continue to show signs of grief and/or risk behaviors should be referred for further support services.

Teachers and Support Staff

- [ ] It is important for teachers to determine if they can teach their class this particular day or will need help to "cover" their class (es). If needed, a teacher may request assistance to cover their classes. It is okay for teachers to grieve and seek help with their assigned duties.
- [ ] Take breaks and have time away from students during the day. Be sure to eat meals and watch personal nutrition and other health habits. After the students have left the building, give yourself an opportunity to process what has happened during the day.
- [ ] Review relevant Appendix sections.

- [ ] Attend the all-staff morning meeting.
- [ ] If needed and with administrative approval, request a substitute to assist in providing individual time to console students, visit with deceased student's parents, etc.
- [ ] Model the classroom discussion by sharing with students their feelings and reactions by normalizing feelings of grief and that grief doesn't happen within a certain time frame or order.

(OR)

- [ ] Teacher could not lead class discussion and informed the principal or Crisis Management Team Leader and requested a Team Member to lead the discussion.
- [ ] Allow students to go to counseling support center (send peer or another adult to accompany them.)
- [ ] Keep a list of student(s) that are "high risk" and give names to Crisis Management Team Leader during and at the end of the day.
- [ ] Defer all questions from the media to the Superintendent's Office.
- [ ] Offer colleagues, who are in need of help, assistance.
- [ ] Attend after-school staff meeting.
- [ ] If appropriate, attend the visitation and/or funeral.

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

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

1. Attend all-staff mandatory meetings and review any available written information.

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

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

Special Considerations

Death By Natural Causes, Accidents, etc.

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

Death By Suicide

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

Gang Related Death

If the death was related to gang related activity, there may be additional safety factors that the school needs to consider:

- Escorts for students who may need counseling support (to avoid gang retaliation concerns)
- Instruct teachers to report any school safety concerns
- Involve police for information and recommendations for safety
- It may be appropriate to have police presence in the school or on the premise (during/before/after school hours)

- Shut down gang related activities (wearing gang colors/symbols in honor of the deceased)

Post Implementation Follow-up

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

2. Modify the building protocol based upon feedback of the crisis management team and others. Provide changes in the protocol to any district level planning group.

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

4. If a staff member is contacted by the media, staff should always defer questions to the Superintendent’s Office.

5. Attend the mandatory all-staff after-school meeting.

Appendix

A. The Funeral Service

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

The most accepted practice for funeral attendance has been to excuse students to attend the funeral only if they have parental permission. The deceased's family may be receptive to scheduling services after school hours so that more people could attend. Crisis management team should be available both at the funeral and at the building to assist distraught persons.

In the case of a suicidal death, the funeral should not be held at the school to avoid glamorizing or romanticizing the death. Students may be excused with parental permission. Continue to stress the fact that death by suicide is a permanent response to temporary problems. If appropriate, contact the minister and discuss ways to help decrease possible contagion. Crisis Management Team members and other support persons should attend the funeral/burial to help any unattended or high-risk persons. If the funeral is during school hours, some team members need to remain in the building to help those students unable to attend.

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

also be appropriate for the school to host a memorial service in the event of multiple accidental deaths of students/faculty.

B. Memorial Guidelines

Gifts and memorials are a mechanism for people to recover from the loss of a death. A small gesture can mitigate feelings of helplessness and communicate the concern of the school. Suggestions for memorials include books for the library, planting a tree, making a quilt, founding a scholarship, etc. The Assistant Superintendent of Business and Finance needs to approve all plans. That office oversees all buildings and ground related decisions.They may refer the administrator/donator to another person to work through the details as well.

When a person has died by suicide or gang related death, the issue of memorials is complicated by the need to prevent romanticizing or glamorizing the death. It is recommended that any activity chosen be a one time event. Memorials for death by suicide might be donations of blood to the Red Cross, contributions to a suicide prevention program, etc. Memorials for gang related deaths might be donations for at-risk youth programming. School staff should discourage whole-school assemblies, full-page dedications in a yearbook, establishment of a scholarship, flying a flag at half mast, or any long-term commemoration. Spontaneous memorials (balloons, flowers, pictures, and letters) should be removed or allowed for only a short time (up until the funeral...and then materials can be given to the family). (This information is referenced from the National Association of School Psychologists).

C. Crisis, Traumatic Event, Death, Bereavement and Grief

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

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

- ## Traumatic Event

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

  ### Determining The Degree Of Trauma Following A Death

  Three variables are generally considered:

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

  ### Post-Traumatic Stress

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

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

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

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

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

- Death

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

- Bereavement

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

- Grief

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

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

D. Guidelines For Helping Someone Who Is Grieving

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

- Let the students know how you feel, encourage them to express their feelings and provide support to those who are grieving.

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

Emotional First Aid

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

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

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

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

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

Problematic Expressions Of Grief

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

Acting out: Getting "carried away" by an enthusiastic expression of grief. Take the person's grief seriously and consult a crisis management team member.

- Self-pity: This is a normal part of grief but at times becomes problematic in that it can bring out anger in the helper. The helper needs to restrain his/her emotions but still be guided by his/her feelings.
- Freezing: This can be a serious situation. This is when the grieving person has no effectual response. If attempts to communicate with the person fail, remain with the person and have someone get help.

Endless Hysterical Sobbing

Be patient with the person, the sobbing will stop when the person is exhausted. Make the person as comfortable as possible, usually covering with a blanket.

Self-Destructive Behavior

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

E. Stages of Grief

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

1. Denial: "No, it can't be! Not him/her!" This may be mixed with shock or disbelief that the event has actually occurred. Students may spend time confirming the facts with fellow students, hoping to discover that there has been some mistake in the reporting.

2. Anger: "Why him/her? Why not 'Someone Else'? Someone Else is always doing bad things. Why not Someone Else?" As the reality of the loss sinks in, there may be blaming of other people for the event having happened. Or there may be anger at unrelated people and events, a need to rant and rave and be critical.

3. Bargaining: "Dear , if you bring him/her back again, I promise I'll be good and never get mad at him/her again." This may be associated with feelings of guilt, where a student wishes to undo earlier interactions with the one who has died, or even make promises that if this event can be undone, the survivor will be a better, different person.

4. Depression: "It's so hard, everything is so hard and nothing seems important anymore." Although survivors have other people for support, they may still feel very much alone and sad.

5. Acceptance: "Well, I don't like what's happened, (sigh) but I can't change anything about it now." This is the culmination of successful grieving when survivors come to grips with the reality of the death.

F. Developmental Stages of Understanding Death and Grieving and How to Comfort

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

- ### Infancy

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

Grieving caregivers can be advised to:

- Spend some time each day in a nurturing, soothing manner with the infant.
- Spend time walking, reading, and talking and also share time with them away from the group.
- Keep the infant's routine as consistent as possible.
- Let other nurturing family members help with caregiving.
- Allow others to help with household tasks.

- ### Preschool Age (2 ½ to 5 years):

Preschoolers do not understand death is permanent. They view it as reversible and temporary. Death may be confused with sleeping or the person merely being absent,

with the belief the person will return. Since children are egocentric, death may be perceived as punishment for wrongdoing or caused because the child had previously wished the person dead. Sometimes, death is thought of as violent. Children also sometimes think they might catch the condition, which caused the death. Some children think dead people live underground.

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

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

Adults can do the following to help a preschool child cope with death:

- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving.
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen.
- Encourage all adults in the school to use terms "dead/death" and not phrases of "passed away", "sleeping", "resting", or "taken from us".
- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities, and schedules.
- Keep explanations short, simple, and truthful. The explanations may need to be frequently repeated.
- Be sure to have good eye contact. Use simple, direct words. Let them be mad or express other feelings.
- Keep any promises made. Be as predictable as possible.

- School Age (5 - 11 years):

The grieving process for young children does not always have discernible stages as observed in adolescents or adults. Such factors as the closeness of the relationship, the time of preparation for the death, and the family's response to the death may influence the nature, duration, and severity of the grief response. After the loss of a loved one, the child may be reluctant to trust other adults for fear they too will die or go away. This confounds the teacher's role in supporting the student.

There are a variety of responses to death and often hide the child's true feelings. The child may behave as if nothing is really wrong, hoping that they can convince

themselves that death is a reversible process and the deceased will return. Often the signs are physical or behavioral in nature, including: crying, clinging, and thumb sucking. Other signs of bodily distress might include: chronic worrying, lack of energy, and loss of appetite. The child may also demonstrate hostile reactions or there may be a looking to others or substituting that is designed to satisfy some physical or emotional need. There may be an idealizing of the individual during the initial response. Perhaps the most powerful response of young children to death is one of guilt. There may be concern that they have done something to cause the death or should have been more helpful while the person was alive.

The teacher can be very helpful to the young child by giving him/her accurate information in simple and understandable words. The information shared should be guided by the child's questions and should avoid the use of phrases such as "going on a long trip" or "going to sleep". By supporting the child's expressions of feeling in a caring manner, the teacher prepares the child for later grief events. If possible, it is helpful to young children to use such experiences as the loss of a pet to begin to acquire the skills necessary to get through the death of a person to whom they are acquainted.

From 5 to 9 years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for them.

Between 9 to 11 years, the child will perceive death as including them. Death is becoming more real, final, universal, and inevitable. The child may show interest in biological aspects of death and want to know details of the funeral.

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

School-age children and adolescents may show these behaviors:

- Crying and/or sobbing
- Anxiety

- Headaches
- Abdominal pain
- Denial of death
- Hostile reaction toward deceased
- Guilt
- Failure to complete homework
- Poor grades
- Lack of attention and concentration
- Loss of manual skills
- Fear of continuing friendship bonds: might lose another friend

Adults can help school-age children and adolescents by:

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

- Teens/Young Adults

Be There: Attend the funeral, visit, call, and spend time with those grieving. Particularly after the initial attention subsides, bring food, do errands.

Listen: Grieving people need to talk about this sudden vacuum in their lives. Allow them to know what you wish to hear about their experiences. "I'd like to be here with you for awhile if you'd like to talk." "It's hard to believe that he's gone, isn't it?"

Send a Note: Notes can share personal memories, short and simple. "I'm thinking of you during these painful days". "I am praying for you during this time."

Give a Gift: A collection of poems. A book to the library in memory of the deceased. A donation to a related charity.

Extend an Invitation: Consider what the person likes to do. Eat out? Go to a play? Take a drive? Bereaved people often decline invitations or cancel at the last minute. Don't give up. Ask again. Don't forget the person after time has passed.

G. Grief/Support Group Considerations

1. Drop-in center all day the first day where news of a sudden death is disseminated.
2. More than one counselor/facilitator is needed in the group at one time; it's also a good idea to have others available for relief purposes.
3. Co-facilitating is especially critical to maintain continuity, in spite of the "drop-in" process, for consultation in identifying high-risk students and for general support and help.
4. Focus:
    a. Memories, positive experiences with person who died
    b. Feelings about loss
    c. Stages of grieving (grief education)-students may bring up spirituality
    d. Funeral and services-appropriate behaviors/concerns about experience
    e. Future-what next?
    f. Guilt work if needed, some need to focus on causation
    g. Family and friend's response (Kids often wonder, "What can I do? How can I help?")
    h. Identifying others that the students are concerned about (provides them with an opportunity to help; gives them a purpose in crises; allows them to be part of a larger supportive community response
5. Avoid focusing on:
    a. Narcissistic focus on suicidal thoughts, feelings, experiences, if the death was by suicide
    b. Constant talk about the actual death (morbid focusing)
    c. Blame
    d. Speculation/rumors
6. Bring the group to some closure the second day-avoid adding new members (may need to meet others on a one-to-one basis); probably will focus more on the funeral and service.
7. May need to reconvene after the funeral for an hour to refocus on grief/loss, bring the group to some closure again and offer various resources for ongoing support.
8. Remember throughout the course of group process, facilitators need to identify students with chronic problems around the issue of death by suicide/self-destructive behavior (regardless of the cause of the death) and to assess whether these youngsters need to be "pulled" from the group. If the students in question are identified as "chronic manipulative attempters" they must be removed from the group and their on-going counselor/therapist should be contacted.

9. The counseling staff may want to consider the possibility of a "neighborhood group" in the evening to reach youngsters at all age levels (checking in with parents to see if there is a need).
10. Finally, we suggest group work as a possibility for the whole system, K-12. Death impacts the whole educational community, not just one branch.

H. Factors Which Indicate High Risk For Complicated Grief

High-risk people need to be identified and offered help. These people include anyone who:

- Participated in any way with a death by suicide or accident.
- Knew of the death by suicide attempt or potential attempt and didn't try to stop it.
- Feels guilty about things they said or did to the deceased prior to the death.
- Had recently punished or threatened to punish the deceased for some misdeed; did not take a death by suicide threat seriously, or had been too busy to talk to a victim who asked for help.
- Were relatives, best friends, and self-appointed therapists; were mentioned in a death by suicide note.
- Identifies with the victim's situation; has a history of suicidal threats or attempts; is desperate and now considers death by suicide a viable alternative.

Check in with students who would be considered to be high risk for complicated grief reactions on a regular basis, particularly at high-risk times. High-risk times include days such as anniversaries of a previous death, birthdays, holidays, expected graduation date, etc. of the deceased student, and the high-risk student's own birthday.

I. Coping With Suicide by Death

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

because they feel they should have been able to help the person, and anger over the fact the suicidal person would abandon them in such a tragic and untimely manner.

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

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

J. Sample Letters Communication to Parents & Students

Informing Parents/Students of a Student/Faculty Death

Sample Letter I:

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

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

The funeral will be held at (Funeral Home or Church) at a.m./p.m. Visitation will be held at (Funeral Home) during the hours of to _____ Parents are encouraged to attend the funeral with their child.

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Principal and Staff

Sample Letter II:

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

As you may be aware, our school district has experienced the death of a (student/faculty member) that has affected us deeply.

Students and staff will react in different ways to the death of one of our school community members. We all should expect and try to understand that there will be a variety of emotions and responses to what has occurred. The most important thing we can do is to be supportive and encourage an open expression of feelings. At the school, we have implemented a plan for responding to this tragic event focused on helping our students and their families get back to regular learning and everyday activities as soon as possible. This plan has evolved from the district's experience with death in the past and the advice of mental health professionals from the district and community. Our teachers and counselors have been briefed on our plans and have received guidelines for discuss death and reactions to it. There will be district personnel available to students who need special attention and support. There is also help available from the community. We will try to maintain a will be maintaining a normal a routine and

structure as the situation and people allows, and we encourage to do the same the same at home. If you feel that your child or family member needs some assistance, please contact us, and we will do everything we can to help you.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the school at (give preferred phone numbers). We know that you will join us in sharing our concern and sympathy for the family.

Sincerely,

Principal and Staff

Sample Announcement to Students

Students, may I have your attention, please. This morning, (<student name>) from our (<insert student's grade>) class died. Today the faculty met to develop a plan to help all of us cope with this tragic event. There will be special support assistance available for any student who feels they need this service. Starting today, counselors and social workers will be available for students who need support. Pause. I would like all of us to reflect for a minute in memory of (<student name>). Pause. Thank you for your attention.

Sample Announcement to students after funeral

It may be appropriate to announce on the day following the funeral, a closure statement to all students and faculty: (This is done the day following the funeral because many of the deceased student's closest friends will not return to school the day of the funeral.)

May I have your attention, please. I wish to thank all of the students and faculty for the support you have shown each other during the past few days. The example you have shown is a positive and healthy one and provides us the opportunity to work toward strengthening our relationships with each other. Counseling staff remains available if you should wish to talk with a counselor or social worker.

Sample Talking Points for Clinician to Talk to Class(es) about Sudden Student/Faculty Death

In higher levels have a point person go to each class and acknowledge the following (in primary levels it is only necessary to go to the primary class):

- Inform class that student died and share appropriate information (depending on age) and ONLY the information approved by family to share.
- Acknowledge that it can be a difficult adjustment even if you didn't know the student well... it is someone who you are used to seeing every day. The death may even trigger other past deaths that you have been through. Or it may trigger other worries about death and dying. This is normal.
- When grieving it is important to pay attention to your basic needs (eating, sleeping, water) and stay on a schedule. Sometimes we forget to pay attention to these basic needs and it affects our emotional wellness.
- Open it up to the class to share any stories about the deceased person if they would like to. Encourage students to share with others in the coming days as it helps with grieving.
- Educate students on the grieving process and it is normal to feel how they are feeling.
- Inform students where to go during the school day and the process if they need to talk to support staff.

Credits

This manual was adapted from:

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Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency
729 21st Street
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