

# Forward

The death of an individual in the school community is a traumatic event and one in which the school needs to respond to 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.

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# Coping With The Sudden Death Of A Student

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# **Crisis, Traumatic Event, Death, Grief, and Bereavement**

## **Crisis**

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 (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 associates 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.

Often times, 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 crises 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 oneself.

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.

## **Grief and Children**

### **Preschool To Age Nine**

This age child usually sees death as temporary and reversible. Between ages of five and nine, children begin to see death more like adults but still believe it will never happen to them.

### **Age Nine To Eleven**

Child begins to understand death can happen to them. Death is becoming more real. This age child may show keen interest in the cause of death, details of the funeral, and in the biological aspects of death.

### **Adolescents**

The adolescent searches for the meaning of life, which includes death. "Why" questions will be asked, many of which have no concrete answers. Often, adolescents' emotional response to death will be very intense and issues of unresolved grief of divorce of parents, etc., will emerge.

## **The Healing Process**

A major part of the healing process is allowing oneself to experience the intense emotions associated with the pain of grief.

The emotions typically experienced are:

- Anger
- Guilt
- Depression

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has developed five stages to the healing process:

- Denial and Isolation
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

## **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 are:

- The best action is to take some kind of action. 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 cliches and easy answers.
- Encourage the grieving person to care for themselves.
- Acknowledge and accept your own limitations. Sometimes you may wish to have the help of outside resources.

## **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 or adult 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 crises 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 affectual 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.

# Superintendent's Role

The superintendent is vital to the implementation of the sudden death response plan. First, the superintendent needs to publicly show support for the concept of school intervention in crises situations such as the sudden death of a school community member. Second, the superintendent needs to respond quickly to the requests of the building principal in which the deceased was a member. Third, the superintendent needs to address the media requests. Fourth, the superintendent must communicate with other district personnel and the board.

## Step One

Have building principal in which a school community member has died, inform superintendent as soon as possible. (Ask what request building principal may have in order to best be able to respond to this traumatic event.) Superintendent informs, as necessary, other building principals and district staff (including bus drivers).

## Step Two

Brief secretary in handling calls and requests for information.

## Step Three

Act as a contact person to the media or designate a person to act in that capacity.

## Step Four

When appropriate, extend condolences to the immediate family and provide appropriate representation at services.

## Step Five

Keep the Board of Education informed.

## Step Six

Monitor intervention process.

## Principal's Role

When any individual within a school becomes aware of the sudden death of a student, be it homicide, suicide, accidental death, or the death of a student following an illness, it should be the responsibility of that individual to immediately call the principal and inform him/her of all the known facts regarding the death. It is important that the principal verify the facts concerning the death; including who has died. (There have, in some instances, been inaccurate accounts of who actually was deceased.) The principal needs to quickly assess the impact this death will have on the school community (i.e., how popular was the person, what extracurricular activities did he/she participate in, etc.) The principal will then take the lead in the activation of the protocol and the process through which students will be notified about the death. If the death occurs outside of school hours, the principal should call members of the **Crisis Management Team**. The team members notify the entire staff that there will be a change in the procedure of the normal school day and requests them to come to school early the following morning. If help, in addition to the building **Crisis Management Team**, is needed, the principal should arrange to notify the appropriate people. If the principal is not available, the associate principal or the principal's designee will begin this process.

A phone calling tree should be established each school year in order that school staff may be notified of school-related emergencies in a timely manner.

## *Pre-Planning Phase*

### **Step One**

Appoint members to the building **Crises Management Team** (typically include counselors, nurse, other building administrators, school social worker, school psychologist, educational consultant, etc.).

### **Step Two**

Organize calling tree.

### **Step Three**

Hold twenty-to-thirty minute staff meeting to review protocol procedures (this needs to be done annually).

## *Protocol Implementation*

### **Step One**

When notified of adult or student death, verify the death with appropriate public officials (if notification was not by family member or public official). Instances have occurred where the notification of who died was incorrect.

### **Step Two**

Notify the school **Crises Team Leader** and assess the expected degree of response from the school community. Factors include groups deceased was involved in, the popularity of the person, etc.

### **Step Three**

If death was not during school hours, activate the pre-arranged calling tree to notify staff of early-morning mandatory meeting. Request that **Crises Management Team** members meet with principal thirty minutes prior to staff meeting.

## Step Four

Designate the **Crises Management Team Leader** as the person responsible for orchestrating the emotional first aid activities for the next few days. This person will serve as the "hub" of information and will direct the team's daily activities.

## Step Five

Direct a staff member to immediately remove contents from deceased student's locker. Hopefully, this can be accomplished discreetly and prior to students returning to school. The personal contents belong to the parents and removal to the principal's office will ensure they are properly presented to the parents.

## Step Six

Direct a staff member to pull the deceased student's cumulative folder to determine what other schools the deceased student might have attended. The principal should call the other schools and inform them of the events that have occurred, particularly, if younger siblings are in those other schools. Secondly, the principal should notify the central administration office of the circumstances of the day. It is also helpful, at this point, to assign responsibility to someone to pull the student's name off any mailing lists that would be sent from the school and central administration office.

## Step Seven

Identify a support center area in the building where students may come for support and counseling. This area should be close to the guidance office and/or the main office to facilitate communications between guidance and administrative staff.

## Step Eight

Prepare an announcement to be read over the P.A. system to the students. *(At the elementary level, it is often best to have the classroom teacher make the announcement.)* **Do not announce the death of a student until it has been verified by reliable sources (i.e., police department, hospital, parents, etc.)**

Note: It is important to have a central spokesperson, usually the principal, for all announcements to students. By the time students reach school following the death of a peer, they will have heard many different versions about what happened. **The presence of a strong, caring, and supportive authority figure (i.e., the principal) sharing information during this stressful time is important.** *(In elementary schools, it is equally important for*

*the classroom teacher to be a strong, caring, and supportive presence since the teacher will be looked upon by the students to provide stability during this crisis period.)*

One example of an announcement is the following:

*Students, may I have your attention, please. Last night (student's name) from our junior class died. This morning the faculty met to develop a plan to help all of us cope with this sad event. There will be special support assistance available for any student who feels they need this service. Today, counselors will be available in (given location) all day. Pause. I would like all of us to reflect for a minute in memory of (student's first name). Pause. Thank you for your attention.*

## **Step Nine**

Direct a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information and to prepare details for student/faculty attendance at the visitation and funeral. When details are final, an announcement can be made to staff and students.

Note: It is important to have faculty members present during the entire visitation period to assist the funeral home staff in handling children and teens. (Please refer to the Appendix regarding funeral and visitation.)

Designate one secretary who will know how to reach the principal throughout the day so the principal can respond to any emergencies/administrative situations which may develop.

## **Step Ten**

Call and/or visit the parents as early as possible to express the school's and your condolences. Visiting the parents is encouraged, and the principal should take along a staff member who has been well acquainted with the student. 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 this may be the first of several visits. *(The parents likely will be in a state of shock. 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.)*

Contact the clergy who will be conducting the funeral to determine what role, if any, students or faculty should play, and to learn what religious traditions will be involved. (See Appendix)

## **Step Eleven**

Prepare a letter to be sent to all parents regarding the death of a school community member (Please see Appendix for sample letters.)

## **Step Twelve**

Arrange fifteen-minute after-school meeting with entire school staff. Review day's activities and seek names of any student faculty thinks needs additional emotional first aid. After meeting with faculty, meet with **Crises Management Team**. Review day's activities and plan for the next day.

## **Step Thirteen**

On the second or third day following the deceased student's funeral, begin to bring closure by encouraging teachers to resume regular classroom activities as quickly as is appropriate.

## **Step Fourteen**

On the day following the funeral, the principal should make the following 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. Guidance staff remain available if you should wish to talk with a counselor. (Any additional comments from the family that have been passed on to the principal might be shared at this point.) In elementary schools the classroom teachers may be the ones to deliver the messages of thanks to the students for the support they have given to each other.*

## ***Post Implementation Follow-up***

### **Step One**

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

### **Step Two**

Modify the building protocol based upon feedback of crises management team and others.

Provide changes in the protocol to any district level planning group.

# Principal's "Check" List

Met with **Crisis Management Team**.

Designated the **Crisis Management Team Leader**.

Arranged for substitute to assist student's classroom teacher.

Instructed a staff member to remove locker contents from deceased student's locker.

Designated a counseling support center in building.

Met with building staff.

Directed staff member to review student's cumulative folder and notify other school principals as needed.

Informed students regarding the death.

Wrote letter to parents of all students regarding the death.

Designated a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information.

Informed students/staff regarding funeral arrangements.

Directed a staff member to remove student's name from all mailing lists, including the district's central office.

Called and/or visited parents.

Held mid-day meeting with **Crisis Management Team Leader** to assess response activities.

Contacted clergy who will be conducting funeral services.

Held after-school meeting.

Met with **Crisis Management Team** at end of day to review day's activities, review list of "high-risk" students, and plan for next day's activities.

# Role Of The Crisis Management Team And Principal

## Mandatory All-Staff Meeting

Prior to the commencement of school following the death of a student, the principal should have an all-staff meeting. Generally, the principal will have approximately fifteen minutes to meet with staff. In addition to the "before school" meeting, it is important to hold an "after school" meeting to discuss the day's events and to talk about any students the faculty has concerns about.

### Step One

The principal will announce an immediate all-staff mandatory meeting. Hopefully, the staff will know of the meeting through telephone-tree notification.

### Step Two

The principal identifies to the staff the **Crisis Management Team Leader** and informs staff this person will assist the principal in directing staff activities.

### Step Three

The principal and the **Crisis Management Team Leader** inform teachers and non-certified staff what is expected of them and review the accompanying hand-out materials. (See Appendix) All confirmed public facts regarding the student should be shared with the staff. *(If death was by suicide, it is important that the staff do not confirm the causation since parents may eventually litigate the issue. However, students will discuss the nature of death, and at that point, the staff can and should discuss the nature of death, and at that point, the staff can and should discuss the issue of suicide. Reinforce the concept that suicide is not an acceptable way to deal with lie's temporary problems and is an act of poor judgement.)*

Request that any staff member who, for whatever reasons, does not believe he/she can discuss this topic with the class, inform the principal. The principal then needs to assign a **Crisis Team** member to the classroom. [In many instances, the teacher(s) closest to the student will automatically need a substitute for the day. The substitute is there to assist the

teacher so the regular teacher can spend individual time consoling students, going with the principal to visit parents, etc. This is an especially important issue at the elementary level.]

#### **Step Four**

Inform staff what announcement will be made to the students and when the announcement will be made. (If possible provide the teachers with a typed copy of the announcement.)

#### **Step Five**

Inform all staff members that any media presence or requests for information should be immediately directed to the principal. (See Appendix)

#### **Step Six**

Announce that a mandatory fifteen-minute faculty meeting will be held after school to review the day's events. This allows an opportunity to receive feedback from faculty, to answer questions, and to review the next day's expectations. *(At this meeting, be sure to get the names of any other students the staff members feel are "high risk".)*

#### **Step Seven**

Entertain questions from the staff and/or requests staff have at this time.

# Crisis Management Team Leader's "Check" List

Listed the teachers and staff who will need extra support because of their closeness, etc. to deceased.

Assigned staff member to classroom where assistance by the teacher has been requested.

Maintained a list of "high risk" students.

Organized the building's counseling efforts including grief group(s).

Assisted in identifying students who were absent and "high risk".

Recommended to the principal students who (A) needed to go home or (B) needed additional community mental health resources.

Reviewed with team all students on "high risk" list and assigned staff member as a case manager.

Assisted in organizing staff's role in funeral arrangements including visitation.

Met with **Crisis Management Team** at end of day to update and plan for next day's activities.

# Role Of Non-Certified Staff

All building personnel are affected by the death of a student. Therefore, it is important to inform non-certified staff of their role in dealing with this event.

## Step One

All non-certified staff should attend the mandatory staff meeting to be informed of the plans for the day. Assistance should be offered to staff members who knew the student and are affected by his/her death.

## Step Two

Secretarial staff should review procedures for handling requests or calls from parents, news media, and others. Secretarial staff need to remove the student's name from mailing lists. The staff need to notify the principal as soon as possible regarding students who are not in attendance. The principal then should discuss with the **Crisis Team Leader** appropriate action to follow concerning any students who might be high risk and are not in attendance at school.

## Step Three

The guidance secretary should free guidance staff schedules for the day. Some counselors may direct the secretary to clear their schedules for several days so they can best respond to this situation.

## Step Four

Non-certified support staff should give the names of any students they are concerned about to the **Crisis Management Team Leader**.

## Step Five

Non-certified staff need to attend the mandatory after-school meeting.

# Teacher's Role

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.

## Step One

Attend all-staff mandatory meetings and review any available written information. (See Appendix.)

## Step Two

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

Note: 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**.

## Step Three: *Death By Natural Causes, Accident, 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.)

### **Step Four: *Death By Suicide***

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

### **Step Five**

Channel names and/or students themselves to the guidance office if they seem high risk now or as the week progresses. (See Appendix) *(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.)*

### **Step Six**

Attend a brief after-school meeting to review the day's events/ The principal and **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.

### **Step Seven**

Attend the mandatory all-staff after-school meeting.

# Teacher's "Check" List

Attended the all-staff a.m. meeting.

If needed, requested a substitute to assist so that I could have individual time to console students, visit with deceased student's parents, etc.

Modeled the classroom discussion by sharing with students my feelings and reactions.

(or)

I felt I could not lead class discussion and informed the principal or **Crisis Management Team Leader** and requested a team member to lead the discussion.

Allowed students to go to counseling support center (sent peer or aide to accompany them.)

Kept list of student(s) I thought were "high risk" and gave names to **Crisis Management Team Leader** during and at the end of the day.

Offered colleagues, who were in need of help, any assistance I could give them.

Attended after-school staff meeting.

If appropriate, attended the visitation and/or funeral.

# Guidance And Support Staff Roles

The guidance and support staff (school social worker, school psychologist, educational consultant, etc.) should take the responsibility of gathering information about students/staff reaction to the death and facilitate individual and/or grief group support sessions.

## Step One

Attend the a.m. staff meeting.

## Step Two

- A. As members of the **Crisis Management Team**, identify and have contact with school staff acquainted with the deceased student and possibly in need of extra support (e.g., a teacher who has had a special relationship with the student, had the student in class, or has a sibling in class.)
- B. Provide "in-class" assistance when requested by teachers.

## Step Three

Start a master list of "high-risk" students in need of extra support. These include: close friends of the deceased student, relatives, students in the same activities or clubs as the deceased student, neighbors of the deceased student, and students with other stressors. (See Appendix for other indicators of students who may be "high risk".)

## Step Four

Guidance and A.E.A. staff should meet briefly with all identified "high-risk" students and with any students who are referred. Decide what, if any, intervention is appropriate (triage). Options could include:

- A. Individual grief counseling.
- B. Grief group. The grief group should automatically be formed the first day, and students should stream in and out during the day. The focus is on memories of the deceased student and grief work. Typically, students will be in grief group for only one or two periods and not all day. For students requiring "excessive" intervention, parents need to be informed and directed to appropriate community resources.
- C. Referral to community mental health center or other appropriate community resource.

## Step Five

Identify students who are absent during the day who may be "high risk," and inform parents of your concern for them. This may include non-school attendees and those students who may have dropped out or transferred.

## Step Six

For students who request to leave school because of their grief reaction:

- A. Release students to parents or an adult designated by the parent. Encourage the parent not to leave the child alone during the day.
- B. Provide parents with guidelines on how to manage grief and a brief listing of community resources. (See Appendix.)
- C. Let the student know that you expect him/her to return to school the next day.
- D. Check to see if the students return the next day and briefly check with them to see how they are doing. If a student has not returned, contact their parents to check to see how he/she is doing. Offer your assistance to the parents and/or student.

## Step Seven

Attend the after-school staff meeting.

## Step Eight

At the end of the first day, the **Crisis Management Team** should meet to update themselves and review the list of "high-risk" students. Throughout the week, review the status of "high-risk" students with the master list. Determine which students may need to be referred to community mental health services based on their previous history and immediate need.

## Step Nine

Discuss the role the guidance/A.E.A. staff will provide in the funeral or memorial service (See Appendix). After the funeral, assist the building staff in moving toward a "normal" atmosphere as soon as possible. (An announcement will be made by the principal regarding continued availability of guidance staff.)

## **Step Ten**

Carefully review with the principal and other **Crisis Management Team** members the memorial requests for the deceased student (See Appendix).

## **Step Eleven**

In a week or two following the crisis, meet as a team and discuss the response activities including those procedures which may need to be modified.

# Appendix

# **Teacher's Role**

## **(Elementary and Secondary)**

# Teacher's Role

## Secondary and Elementary

*Following the death of a student, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. This brief handout is intended to provide a guide for your use in assisting the students in your classes through the next few days and weeks as they resolve their feelings related to this death.*

Normal grief is generally characterized by progression from an initial state of shock and denial, to one of rage and anger, to one of disorganization and despair, and finally to a state of acceptance and hope.

In the event of a sudden death, many youngsters may arrive at school already "buzzing" with the news. Rumors will have already started before school convened, but there will also be many youngsters who arrive with no knowledge of the deceased student's death. Youngsters will be saying, "I just can't believe it!" "Not him/her. It can't be!" "This must be a joke."

Other youngsters will quickly move to being angry. They will want to blame anyone and everyone for the death - other friends, parents, police, teachers, the medical personnel, and finally, themselves.

Guilt will be a feeling many youngsters may experience and want to discuss. In the aftermath of an adolescent death, many youngsters will be going back and retracing their last encounter with the adolescent who has died. They add to their guilt by often blowing out of proportion small fights that may have occurred or minor disagreements they may have had. After their guilt period, they may feel that they are in some way responsible for the death.

For many of your students, this may be their first encounter with death. They will look to you for guidance and modeling. To share with the students your own feelings when you are told of the death--your shock, your sadness, your confusion--is valuable. To reminisce about your relationship with the deceased student, if you know him/her is important. Share with students what you will remember about him/her.

Let students know these feelings are normal. Reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened. Encourage the students to be supportive of one another and to escort any friend who is upset to a teacher or the guidance office. Reassure them that the adults in the building are available to help. Also, encourage the students to discuss their feelings with their parents.

The most important thing teachers can do is to allow some opportunity for students to express feelings related to the death. Help them through the grief process by acknowledging the pain and grief they are experiencing, by being a good, active listener, and by reassuring them that their feelings are normal and expected.

# Specific Information For Elementary Teachers

The response of a young child to the death of a significant person may vary depending upon the personal, family, and social factors. The grieving process 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.

The 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.

# **Parent Communications**

# Parent Communications

Parents will want information when a death has occurred in the school. Depending on the nature of the emergency, the entire community may be affected. By issuing press/media statements you will meet some of the community's need for information, however, special communications to parents may be extremely helpful in gaining their support for the school and in reaching satisfactory closure to the crises.

## **Parent Communications By Phone:**

- Use active listening skills to calm an upset parent.
- Contact the parents of any student who has had a difficult time coping with the death and give suggestions on how to offer support at home plus information on community mental health resources.
- Reassure parents that the school is responding to the emergency and describe the response activity.

## **Guidelines For Written Communication To The Parents:**

Depending on the impact of the death, a letter may be sent home with every student in the class or classes involved and in some cases with the entire school. This letter could include the following information:

- Information about the death that has occurred.
- What the children have been told.
- Grief reactions that the parents might expect to see in their children.
- How to respond to their children.
- Resources available to the parents.
- Steps the school is taking to cope with the situation.

## **Guidelines For Parent Meetings:**

The general experience of school personnel holding large group or assembly meetings for parents has been that these meetings tend to add contagion to the crises rather than to minimize the impact for the community. The recommendations for parent meetings are for small group meetings to be held off school premises, if possible, perhaps in neighborhood centers. Some schools have successfully conducted parent meetings by assigning small groups to classrooms and arranging for two facilitators for each group. If a meeting is held off campus, staff should attend the meetings to reassure parents that the school is responding to the emergency. Any parent meeting should be conducted during after-school hours.

An alternative to group meetings may be to offer parents drop-in counseling during after-school hours. This arrangement should be offered for no more than one school week.

# Sample Letters to Parents

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of Joe Doe, a sophomore in our school. John 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. (Note: Send a letter home to parents even if you do not know the details of the funeral arrangements.)

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. I 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 Letters To Parents

Dear Parent:

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

The 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 every day 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 community. Our teachers and counselors have been briefed on our plans and have received guidelines for discussing about 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 as normal a routine and structure as the situation and people allow, and we encourage you to do the same. If you feel that your child or family 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 you will join us in our concern and sympathy for the family.

Sincerely,

Principal and Staff

# Parent Referrals For Counseling

What should parents watch for in terms of referring their child for counseling?

Some indicators of children who might need counseling include the following:

- Children who have experienced another recent loss.
- A child who has made suicide attempts or who makes suicidal statements.
- A child who had a close relationship with the deceased student but pretends that absolutely nothing has happened and continues to do so for an extended period of time.
- A student's schoolwork takes a dramatic decline or the youngster develops a phobic fear of school.
- A child's behavior changes significantly over a long period of time.
- A child demonstrates continual preoccupation with death.

The next page of this booklet was written by parents of a 16 year old student who committed suicide. The following information was written to help the individual reading this booklet understand their background and their experience.

Jeffrey A. Knutson  
05/10/1983 – 07/28/1999

Jeff committed suicide on July 28, 1999. He was 16 years old and it was the summer of his sophomore year at North Scott High School in Eldridge, IA. Jeff was working as a lifeguard at the Scott County Park Pool that summer. He was involved in his church youth group and had attended a week of church camp prior to his suicide. Jeff had been involved in Boy Scouts and had earned the rank of Eagle Scout. He was an exceptionally good bass guitar player and had saved his money working as a paperboy to buy his guitar and two amplifiers. He had many friends and family who loved him very much.

Jeff did not show any of the typical signs of depression or share any suicidal thoughts he may have felt. He left a note that just said good-bye to his family and friends and did not give any reason for his suicide. To this day the reason is still a mystery. After Jeff's death a toxicology report was done which showed no sign of drugs or alcohol in his system.

Jeff's family (Brad, Dawn and Ashley) knew that they would need help in dealing with Jeff's death. It came as a total surprise to them that Jeff had committed suicide. They went to counseling for 9 months learning how best to deal with their grief, anger, hurt and loss. Many questions needed to be answered...how do you face your community? How do you deal with the untrue rumors? How do you pick up and move forward with your life? How do you teach all of the teens who knew Jeff and were watching the family that you can take a tragedy in your life and use it to help others?

# A Parent's Perspective

On July 28, 1999, our son, Jeff Knutson, committed suicide. Jeff's suicide was during the summer when school was out of session. As his parents, we were devastated by Jeff's death and shocked that he committed suicide. Since that time we have been working to educate teens about depression and suicide prevention. We have been working closely with MBEA and were asked to share our input on the events following Jeff's death. To share what was helpful to us as a family and what we feel was helpful from the community and school. We will also share with you ideas that we think would be good to consider for future needs.

Things that helped us emotionally directly after Jeff's death:

1. School officials, teachers, social workers, and counselors attended Jeff's visitation and funeral. (School was not in session at this time and we felt they were going above and beyond their job responsibility by being available to the kids during the summer, they could've just let the parents handle it alone.)
2. School counselors, social workers, and psychologists remained at the funeral home during both visitation and funeral to help with any teens that felt they may need help in dealing with their grief. It is important and a relief for us to know that any of Jeff's friends who needed help would have it available to them.
3. It is important to remember that a funeral and visitation are not a school function-they are personal services planned by the grieving family and, therefore, the school officials should ask for the families permission before assuming they are welcome to provide those services at the site of the funeral and visitation. An alternate location for counseling may be set up if needed.
4. In regards to funerals during the school year, it is greatly appreciated when the teens are allowed to attend the service. It is especially needed for their healing and grieving process and also helps the family of the deceased.
5. We appreciated the teachers who took the time to stop by the house, call or send cards.
6. The local clergy also provided places for teens to go to meet after Jeff's death. It was reassuring to us when we would get a call that a friend was at a meeting and was okay.
7. We appreciated the school's willingness to let us plant a memorial tree.
8. We appreciated the school's working with Jeff's classmates to have an Isabel Bloom memorial in the Library and a stone and tree by the new ball diamonds.

9. We appreciated the school calling us on such issues as a yearbook page, memorials, and graduation ceremonies. It allowed us the ability to work with the school and Jeff's classmates on these issues and to handle them in a way that was beneficial to all.
10. We appreciated the valedictorians (3 of them) calling us before preparing their speeches and asking our permission to include Jeff in their speech. It showed respect to our family and gave us forewarning and time to prepare for what was to come at the ceremonies.

If we had any suggestions, it would be these three things:

1. Follow-up Meeting: call the family to set up a time for one or two school counselors, psychologist, social worker or representative to meet with the family one or two weeks after the services. Many times the words were said "let us know if we can do anything for you". Those are comforting words, however, at the time of the visitation and funeral you are overwhelmed and may not know what you need. Grieving parents may not make the call themselves if they do need something. If school aged siblings are involved it is especially important to have follow-up. We were not aware of all the services the school and MBAEA could provide and, therefore, did not know what we could request help with. If there was a follow-up meeting those services could be discussed with the family.
2. Continued Grief counseling for the teens provided by either the school, community organization, or clergy would be beneficial. Teens do not understand the grieving process and many times their parents do not either. Teaching parents and teens what to expect may help them to understand their reactions and responsibilities in dealing with the death of a friend.
3. There are many different beliefs and feelings regarding death by suicide. Remember that depression is a mental illness. The family may have been dealing with this illness just as other families deal with a child's death by cancer. The loss of a son or daughter – no matter what the cause – is devastating to the family. Respect the family by not gossiping or sharing in community rumors that may only come back to hurt the family, friends and school. It is not anyone's place to judge and, as professionals, others will be watching you and taking your lead. Your words and actions can make a huge difference in the recovery of that family.

**The "Faith Communities"  
Role in Responding to  
Death in the Schools**

# Understanding The Religious Response To Death

*This page is written and submitted by North Scott Clergy Group  
influenced by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross*

**Reverend Robert Bartel**

Park View Lutheran

**Reverend Dick Clark**

Eldridge United Methodist Church

**Reverend Steve Ebel**

St. Ann's Catholic Church

**Reverend David Herron**

Our Savior Presbyterian

**Reverend Edythe Hill**

McCausland United Methodist Church

**Reverend Rick Johnson**

Manager, Pastoral Care, Genesis Medical Center

**Pastor George McCord**

Living Church of Jesus Christ

**Reverend Dan Mixdorf**

Faith Lutheran Church

**Reverend Scott Pearson**

Cornerstone Baptist Church

**Reverend Dawn Phares**

New Hope United Methodist Church

**Reverend Kathleen Thomas**

Long Grove Christian Church

The events of birth and death are life's greatest mysteries. In both, there is an acute awareness that life is very valuable. There is no language to express it. Death is the most solemn of human events. We immediately sense a loss that is greater than all the other losses experienced in life.

People vary in their responses to death as they attempt to make sense of its mystery. The question "why", is an attempt to make sense of one's own suffering, the meaning of life and death, and where God is found in the midst of it. Questions about death, meaning, absurdity, destiny, and trust in God are faith questions.

Death is by nature a social event. It breaks in on a community, reminding us all of our finitude. It rearranges relationships in families, among friends, and in the wider community. The care of grieving souls is best understood, not just as individual care for a single person, but also as interpersonal or corporate.

The faith community is available to support people (students, teachers, siblings) as they ask these questions and seek a support that extends through and beyond the awesome mystery of death.

The presence of clergy on a **Crisis Management Team**, offers a unique ministry of presence. It is one of "being with," an attentive presence that represents the faith community, and a witness to the insurmountable power and goodness of God. It is expected that clergy will be significantly present both as interpreters and counselors in the midst of such brokenness, and a resource for hope and faith at a time of pain, confusion, and disorientation.

The faith community also responds to death at the funeral. The purpose of the funeral is to celebrate the person's life, offer thanks to the Creator and Sustainer of life, and to support those who grieve by using and offering or sharing resources of faith. Foundational resources are prayer, the comforting word of God, the Spirit of God, and a shared memory. The funeral has

social and psychological functions, bringing family and friends together in a supportive community. The church commends the dead to God's merciful love and at the same time affirms that although the dead are separated from us, there is still a spiritual bond that exists between the living and the dead.

Whatever the cause of death, e.g. accident, natural causes, or suicide, the role of the clergy conducting the funeral is to care for the bereaved with compassion and offer the unqualified support of the faith community. The clergy person would do well to be sensitive to the interfaith makeup of the students assembled and therefore offer a service that is ecumenical in nature. That service would offer a witness to the trustworthiness of God and the hope of resurrection.

# **Memorials and Guidelines Regarding the Funeral**

# Funeral Service and Memorials

## Guidelines Regarding The Funeral

During the 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. If district buses are available to transport students, parents must provide written permission for their child to ride the bus. Staff 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 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.

# Guidelines for Memorials

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.

When a person has died by suicide, 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 suicides might be donations of blood to the Red Cross, contributions to a suicide prevention program, etc.

- **Stages of Grief**
- **Developmental Stages and Grief**
- **How to Comfort Those Who Grieve**
- **How to Converse with Grieving People**
- **Grief Support Group Suggestions**
- **Factors Indicating High Risk for  
Complicated Grief**
- **Understanding Post Traumatic Stress**

# 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.

**S** Denial  
**H** Anger  
**O** Bargaining  
**C** Depression  
**K** Acceptance

# Developmental Stages of Understanding Death and Grieving

## **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.
- Keep the infant's routine as consistent as possible.
- Let other nurturing family members help with caregiving.
- Allow others to help with household tasks.

## **Pre-School Age: (Two and one half to five years)**

Pre-schoolers 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, thumbsucking, 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 pre-school 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.

### **School Age:**

From **five to nine** years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for them.

Between **nine to eleven** 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.

# How To Comfort Those Who Grieve (Child)

1. **Infancy:** Spend time with the child walking, reading, talking. Spend some time with them away from the group.
2. **Listen:** Be sure to have good eye contact. Use simple, direct words. Let them be mad or express other feelings.
3. **Explain Things:** Give information about what's going to happen. Keep any promises made. Be as predictable as possible.

# How To Comfort Those Who Grieve (Adult)

1. **Be There:** Attend the funeral, visit, call, and spend time with those grieving. Particularly after the initial attention subsides, bring food, do errands.
2. **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?"*
3. **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."
4. **Give a Gift:** A collection of poems. A book to the library in memory of the deceased. A donation to a related charity.
5. **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.**

# How To Converse With Grieving People

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.

Some suggestions are:

- 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, 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, 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, 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.

# Grief Support Group

## Some Ideas/Suggestions

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
6. Bring 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 funeral and services.
7. May need to reconvene after funeral for an hour to refocus on grief/loss; bring group to some closure again and offer various resources for on-going support.
8. Remember throughout the course of group process, facilitators need to identify students with chronic problems around the issue of 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.

# Factors Which Indicate High Risk For Complicated Grief

1. High-risk people need to be identified and offered help. These people include anyone who:
  - a. Participated in any way with a suicide or accident.
  - b. Knew of the suicide attempt or potential attempt and didn't try to stop it.
  - c. Feels guilty about things they said or did to the deceased prior to the death.
  - d. Had recently punished or threatened to punish the deceased for some misdeed; did not take a suicide threat seriously, or had been too busy to talk to a victim who asked for help.
  - e. Were relatives, best friends, self-appointed therapists; were mentioned in a suicide note.
  - f. Identifies with the victim's situation; has a history of suicidal threats or attempts; is desperate and now considers suicide a viable alternative.
  
2. 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: anniversaries of a previous death, birthdays, holidays, expected graduation date, etc. of the deceased student, and the high-risk student's own birthday.

# Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress

Under limited circumstances, 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 disasters, etc.) Symptoms of post-traumatic stress include:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event.
- Avoidance of stimuli the person associates 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 natural occurrence to the event.
- Helping the person discharge "pent-up" pain.

Often times, 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.

# **Coping With A Suicidal Death**

# Coping With A Suicidal 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 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 suicide. Stress to the students that 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 suicide. School personnel should allow the discussion of 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 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.

# Working With The Media

It is important to have an established plan for communication with the media when a crisis occurs within a school district. Representatives of the media can become partners in informing the community of the pertinent details of the crisis and the ways in which the district has responded. A good media communication plan will provide for a streamlining of accurate information to the public and will enhance internal communication as well.

If the relationship is built on trust and integrity, working through a crisis together is not nearly as difficult. Suggestions for developing that positive relationship might include providing your media representatives with regular information on upcoming events, returning telephone calls promptly, readily responding to their requests for information, or initiating a meeting to discuss their communication needs. In summary, direct and honest communication from you will earn the respect, and even friendship, of reporters whom you can trust when a crisis comes.

Developing district policies and procedures regarding media relations is the first step in clarifying staff action in difficult times. The next section includes sample media policies, and the following suggestions can serve as a model for building a media relationship. These policies and procedures should be individualized to meet the needs and conditions of your building or school district.

## Media Communication Procedure

The following procedures address the channels of communication which should be established with media representatives. Of equal importance is the communication of information to the internal audiences of the district, especially the Board of Education. When the district is informed of a crisis, members of the Board and all administrators should be informed immediately. All staff members should know the name and phone number of a district or building media contact person and should understand the guidelines for their responses to media questions concerning the crisis.

### Step One

#### Media Contact Person

In most cases, the media contact person for a school district will be the superintendent, the public information specialist, or the building principal. Depending on the nature of the crisis, these or other individuals might assume this role. It is most important that the identity and phone number of this individual be provided for all staff members concerned with the crisis so they may direct media inquiries to that person.

At the onset, this individual will focus his or her attention on gathering all available information, compiling it, and distributing it to the Board and administration. Regular updates of this information should be provided as needed. Advanced planning will reduce future difficulty and accuracy.

## **Step Two**

### **Contacting The Family**

In the event that this crisis involves a death or injury, this collection of information includes contacting the family of the victim. The contact person should explain the district's policies and procedures for communicating with the media, and in some instances, may offer district assistance in issuing a statement for the family. An assurance of confidentiality on the part of the district is most important as well as a sensitivity to the family's needs.

## **Step Three**

### **Taking The Initiative With The Press**

As soon as accurate information has been gathered and internal contacts have been made, the media contact person should take the initiative in contacting the media. This contact may be in the form of a telephone statement or a written release. In some cases, the district may elect to conduct a press conference which allows the reading of an official statement and questions by a group of media representatives. This initial communication is a good time to establish group rules for reporters. The media contact person should explain that any contact with students must take place away from the school. Do not attempt to "muzzle" the media. The correct information you give about your school is better than inaccurate information or the "guessing" which can occur when you refuse to allow interviews. Remember, you are not the sole source of information. Police reports are public documents; news rooms have scanners; police checks are a twice-daily routine in most news rooms; reporters have personal sources. Decide what is appropriate for the school or district to say and say it. Prepare and issue a statement. Express the sorrow of the faculty and student body, explain what is being done in the school to deal with the reaction to the crises, make positive comments about the deceased student.

It is very likely that in spite of these early communication efforts, you will receive a surprise visit from a television crew or newspaper reporters. In these events, the principal or media contact person should invite the media representatives to his or her office and explain the ground rules about not disrupting the school routine. Do not allow media persons to roam the building or hallways. Communicate to the media representatives that you are willing to provide them with information. By conveying a cooperative attitude, you can impact how the story is covered by the media. If you have a number of television companies who wish to film in the school, ask them to work together to "pool" their tape. This will eliminate having the television camera add to the problem. One station can film and share it with the others. The print media will want to take pictures, but this type of filming is not as offensive in

crises. Conflicts may arise that stem from differences in role. Continue to restate the need to protect the students and educational process from unnecessary turmoil. Bear in mind that you must allow time for deadlines. A good time for a press conference is 9:30 a.m. so the newspaper will have the same advantage as the television stations. Have information printed and give copies to all who attend so the facts cannot be disputed. **Do not talk off the record.** Most reporters do not recognize "off the record" comments, but even if they do, the information can be damaging at a later date. Say what you must—openly and honestly, giving the facts. Never commit the faux pas of asking the reporter to see the story before it is used. The reporter's responsibility is to the audience and his/her boss—not to your program.

The media contact person should take advantage of all opportunities to advise the community of the positive steps the district has taken to help staff, students, and parents cope with and recover from the crises.

Any emotional support being provided to the staff or students should be communicated. This support may take the form of school assemblies or individual assistance via social workers, psychologists, or counselors. Do not miss the opportunity to convey the district's acceptance of its responsibility to respond positively to the crises.

## **Step Four**

### **Advise Students Of The District's Media Procedure**

Students are, perhaps, the least prepared to handle media questions about a crisis. Teachers or administrators should explain to students that reporters may be asking them questions and suggest that they not make any comment they would not want said about themselves. Students need to understand that they don't have to talk to reporters and should feel free to say "no" if that is their inclination. If they decide to speak to reporters, they should do so away from school. While on school grounds, media questions will be addressed by designated adults.

## **Step Five**

### **Keep Accurate Records**

The media contact person should keep a record of all printed articles concerning the crises. In some cases, it is even possible to obtain videotapes of news broadcasts concerning the crisis. These will be valuable as the school district evaluates its Media Communications Procedure after the crisis is over. A record of all media releases and subsequent articles may help future administrators to deal with similar crises.

Partnership is the catch phrase in education today. It is important for educators to remember that the media can be a constructive partner in effective communication with the public. This partnership is invaluable during times of crises. By developing a healthy relationship with your

media representatives and establishing a Media Communication Procedure, your district can be prepared when a crisis occurs.

## **Sample Media Policies**

Code No.

## **School District Personnel And The News Media**

As a general rule, school district personnel may not be interviewed during the school day or periods of extracurricular activities by anyone other than school district officials regarding school business. School district personnel, while on the school district grounds, shall refer requests they receive to be interviewed or to provide information to the news media to the administrative office in their building.

It shall be within the discretion of the superintendent to allow news media to interview and to receive information from school district personnel.

It shall be the responsibility of the superintendent to develop administrative regulations regarding this policy.

Legal Reference: Iowa Code 279.8 (1987).

Cross Reference: 901 Public Communications

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Revised: \_\_\_\_\_

*IASB POLICY DEVELOPMENT SERVICE--REFERENCE POLICY--1988*

**News Releases**

The board president or superintendent shall determine when a news release about internal school and board matters will be made. Such news releases will be prepared and disseminated to news media in the area.

Only the board president or superintendent will be available on behalf of the school district and the board to answer media representative's questions about the news release.

It shall be the responsibility of the superintendent to approve news releases originating at the schools prior to its release to the news media.

Legal Reference: Dobrovolny v. Reinhardt, 173 N.W.2d 837 (19\_\_).  
Widmer v. Reitzler, 182 N.W.2d 177 (19\_\_).  
Iowa Code 21.4, 22.7 (1987).  
1980 Op. Att'y Gen. 73.

Cross Reference: 902 Press, Radio and Television News Media

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Revised: \_\_\_\_\_

*IASB POLICY DEVELOPMENT SERVICE--REFERENCE POLICY--1988*

## **Students And The News Media**

As a general rule, students may not be interviewed during the school day or periods of extracurricular activities by anyone other than school district officials and personnel. The students, while on the school district grounds, shall refer requests they receive to be interviewed with or to provide information to the news media to the administrative office in their building.

It shall be within the discretion of the principal, after consulting with the superintendent, to allow or disallow the news media to interview and to receive information from the students while the student is under the control of the school district. The principal may also contact the student's parents.

It shall be the responsibility of the superintendent to develop administrative regulations regarding this policy.

Legal Reference: Iowa Code 279.8 (1987).

Cross Reference: 502.13 Interrogations of Students by Outside Agencies  
901 Public Communications

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Revised: \_\_\_\_\_

*IASB POLICY DEVELOPMENT SERVICE--REFERENCE POLICY—1988*

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