

# Wayne

Township Public Schools



## **Bereavement and Loss Manual for Administration and Staff**

In a time of crisis, no one should be without support. As administrators and educators, we strive to provide direction, strength, and support to our students, but a crisis situation such as a death can be a challenge to navigate as we grapple with the loss of a member of our school community along with our own emotional response. It is at these times that we too need support to enable us to provide a sense of stability and safety to the students in our care. The aim of this manual is to scaffold that structure, to be a quick reference at a time when communication and decision making are of the highest importance. Our mission statement explains that we are “committed to working together to meet students’ social, emotional and academic needs, in order to empower all students to feel Capable, Connected, and Contributing.” This manual will support us in meeting that mission even in the most trying of times.

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# SCHOOL BEREAVEMENT AND LOSS RESPONSE ACTION PLAN & CHECKLIST

	<b>First Meeting</b>		
<b>Timing</b>	<p>Before the school day begins, or as soon as possible after an incident during the day</p> <p>Start: _____ Finish: _____</p>		
<b>Participants</b>	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 60%; vertical-align: top;"> <input type="checkbox"/> School Administrator  <input type="checkbox"/> School Counselor  <input type="checkbox"/> School Social Worker  <input type="checkbox"/> School Nurse  <input type="checkbox"/> School Psychologist  <input type="checkbox"/> School Resource Officer             </td> <td style="width: 40%; vertical-align: top; border-left: 1px solid black;">                 Other: _____                  _____                  _____                  _____             </td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> School Administrator <input type="checkbox"/> School Counselor <input type="checkbox"/> School Social Worker <input type="checkbox"/> School Nurse <input type="checkbox"/> School Psychologist <input type="checkbox"/> School Resource Officer	Other: _____ _____ _____ _____
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<b>Actions</b>	<p>1. Plan how and when information will be communicated to staff, students, parents/guardians</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Script: _____</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Staff: _____</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students: _____</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Parents: _____</li> </ul> <p><i>*If crisis involves a student death, be sure that communications announcing the death are not sent to that student's parents</i></p> <p>2. At-risk students or staff based on the following descriptors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students/staff who witnessed incident</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Relatives, close friends, girlfriends/boyfriends, teammates, coaches, etc.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students/staff who have a recent loss or experienced any other recent event who may be triggered by this incident</li> </ul> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>3. Determine which staff member(s) will follow up with the individuals mentioned above. <i>Determine if any of these individuals should be met with before a larger announcement is released</i></p> <p>Staff Member: _____</p> <p>4. Determine a location (counseling office, health office, overflow room, etc.) where affected students/staff can go when they need time during the</p>		

	<p>day. Use a sign-in sheet to track students who have been seen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two separate spaces should be designated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ For talking &amp; quiet space</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>Trained clinicians or providers should be assigned to cover these locations at all times</i></p> <p>Locations: _____</p>		
	<h2>Second Meeting</h2>		
<p><b>Timing</b></p>	<p>Midway through crisis response</p> <p>Start: _____ Finish: _____</p>		
<p><b>Participants</b></p>	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 60%; vertical-align: top;"> <input type="checkbox"/> School Administrator  <input type="checkbox"/> School Counselor  <input type="checkbox"/> School Social Worker  <input type="checkbox"/> School Nurse  <input type="checkbox"/> School Psychologist  <input type="checkbox"/> School Resource Officer </td> <td style="width: 40%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Other: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/> School Administrator <input type="checkbox"/> School Counselor <input type="checkbox"/> School Social Worker <input type="checkbox"/> School Nurse <input type="checkbox"/> School Psychologist <input type="checkbox"/> School Resource Officer	<p>Other: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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<p><b>Actions</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify students/staff who have been referred but not yet seen since first meeting</li> <li>2. Identify additional groups that will need debriefing (sports, clubs, etc.)</li> <li>3. Determine staff who will be responsible for following up with those identified in steps 1 and 2 above</li> <li>4. Determine if changes or updates are needed to the information that has been sent to parents/guardians/others</li> <li>5. Plan for dismissal. Consider media and safety concerns when necessary. Contact Communications, Wayne PD, others if necessary</li> </ol>		



# ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

## Bereavement and Loss Response Checklist

Prior to the event:

(Keep at home)

- Student Roster (updated quarterly)
- Staff Cell Phone Numbers
- Response Checklist (this document)

Immediately

(Upon notification from family/agency)

- Verify the Death (Do not make decision or announcement until verified)
  - Family – As soon as appropriate
  - Police Department - Take ID to prove your identity
  - Notify Central Office
  - Mark Toback, Superintendent (cell) 201-470-8988
  - Donna Reichman, Assistant Superintendent (cell) 973-476-6460
  - Dawn Auerbach, Director of Elementary (cell) 973-896-0361
  - Matt Mignanelli, Director of Secondary (cell) 203-676-1736
  - Dana Sir, Director of Student Support Services (cell) 201-819-7520
  - Mary (Maggie) Landowski, Supervisor of Health Services (cell) 973-865-7270
  - Mary Vineis, Traumatic Loss Coalition (cell) 862-684-2166

Provide guidance to secretaries regarding incoming calls and inquiries

- Contact School Crisis Management Team**
  - Set meeting time
  - Identify process for students who display immediate need (use of floaters to escort to counselors, etc.)
  - Delegate tasks as appropriate
- Hold School Crisis Team Meeting**
  - Suggested tasks to cover at School Crisis Team Meeting
  - Identify adult supervision for early arriving students during staff meeting
- Script Message for the Staff Meeting**
  - Be sensitive to the event and needs of the family (see sample in appendix)

- As soon as appropriate, contact the family, asking what the family would like to be shared
- Extend condolences
- Obtain any pertinent information from the family to share – copy on soft colored paper

**FERPA Guidelines**

- Staff should follow the same rules when determining what student information is released, as if the student were still alive (refer to [FERPA Guidelines](#))

**Start School Staff Emergency Notification**

- Read scripted message including time for staff meeting before or after school, whichever is soonest
- Delegate tasks as appropriate

**Hold General Staff Meeting**

**Suggested areas to cover at staff meeting:**

- Information regarding death; be as specific & clear as needed
- Review school procedures
- Get copies of student's schedule
- Have counselor visit each classroom
- Designate specific locations for the counselors/students' support center
- Distribute copies (or send via building email) of a statement to be read in all classes
- Students are informed in classes, not in a large assembly or over the PA (read script verbatim)
- Remind staff to rehearse any scripted message before delivering it to others
- Keep routines as normal as possible
- Encourage students to stay in class
- Students who need support are sent to counselor or student support center
- Discourage students from leaving school
- Make arrangements to call parents of students who are very upset so they can be sent home, if needed. Try to keep a routine in place if possible
- Remind staff of support services people in the area who can help adults who are affected Be aware of the feelings of former teachers as well as current teachers ( See community resource listing)
- State location of media contact center
- Direct all news media or inquires to central office
- Schedule end-of-day debriefing with staff & teachers (optional attendance)
- Moment of silence, if requested, to end meeting



## Ongoing Responsibilities

- Request additional central office assistance if needed i.e., subs, floaters, clerical, additional school counselors
  - Identify any siblings or relatives in other district schools and inform appropriate parties
- Main office/communication center
- Deal with relevant phone calls
- Be focal point for confirmed information
- Refer all news media to appointed media contact person
- Meet with Crisis Team during the school day to determine procedures for subsequent days and to debrief
- Make arrangements for bringing student's belongings to the family. Include: locker clean out, hall, PE, band, etc. Remember to check if locker is shared with another student. Place belongings in an appropriate container right away
- Visit each classroom to see how staff and students are doing
- Discourage any dramatization, memorial services, PA announcements, or closing the school for the funeral
- Designate point person who will receive Student Summary Forms
- Send copies of all correspondence/messages to assistant superintendent (email) prior to sending out
- Determine how information will be sent home
- Student hand-carry
- Email
- Emergency Notification - email, text, call
- Identify parents/volunteer role
- Plan for student remembrance, if appropriate, via a living memorial, yearbook, award ceremonies<sup>1</sup>, school dances, etc.
- Update central office regularly
- Update staff regularly via e-mail

# DUTIES OF THE BUILDING CRISIS TEAM

## MEMBERS

### Bereavement and Loss Response Checklist

- Counselor obtains deceased student's schedule and checks on student's classes
- Organize the library or other suitable room for a Student Support Center
- Assist both students and staff through crisis counseling (check & monitor)
- Obtain class schedule of sibling/s of the deceased student and attend his/her classes
- Determine:
  - Friends impacted
  - Staff who were close to student
  - Rumor control for students' well-being
- Notify administrative secretary of any necessary materials needed for the Student Support Center
- Identify other possible support rooms as needed
- Debrief at the end of the day

# DUTIES OF ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL OR DESIGNATED ASSISTANT

## Bereavement and Loss Response Checklist

- Support the principal and carry out delegated tasks that may include the following:
- Copy the deceased student's schedule and distribute to the Building Crisis Team
- Meet with the teachers of the deceased student and inform them of the arrangements that have been made for counselor/Crisis Team members to attend the student's classes that day
- Identify siblings, boyfriend/girlfriend, as well as close friends of the deceased, and distribute
- information to the counselors/Crisis Team. (Make arrangements for counselors/Crisis Team members to talk to them)
- Notify other school support staff including coaches, media specialists, cafeteria personnel, and custodial staff

## Ongoing Responsibilities

Support the principal.

Be the liaison between the principal and the Crisis Team.

Monitor the condition of the school community.

Monitor the in school Crisis Team members.

Monitor teachers of the deceased individual.

Check all extracurricular activities and notify the organizer if the deceased was a participant.

\* If high school, activities director and coaching staff/booster personnel should be notified.

# DUTIES OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE SECRETARY

## Bereavement and Loss Response Checklist

- Respond to students who come to the office and direct them to counseling staff or location

### Meet with other secretaries in the school to:

- As calls are received from the community, refer message to principal
- Determine their needs for support/relief
- Where possible, arrange for stand-by teacher to substitute for the Crisis Team members
- Clear the principal's calendar
- Provide food/beverages for staff/volunteers
- Provide beverages for Student Support Center
- Notify late or absent staff
- Check to make sure materials listed for the Student Support Center are brought to that location (see end of Secretary Duties)
- Locate any other materials the Crisis Team members may need and deliver to the Student Support Center
- Act as liaison for communicating information between central office and the principal when the principal is not available
- Provide Student Summary to teachers so they can document students they have had contact with who may be in need of follow-up with counseling staff

*It is important to identify any students you feel were particularly upset by the event and will need follow-up by documenting it in the Student Summary form. Staff should use this form to record the names of students with whom they have had direct contact specific to the event. Be sure to record critical information and any unique facts that might be relevant to counseling staff. Forms should be submitted to principal-designated point person as soon as possible and within the school day.*

- Ensure that the Resources Binder is up-to-date for sharing; Make copies as-needed

## Materials for Student Support Center

List of suggested materials:

*Tissues*

*Sign in/out Sheet*

*School Passes*

*Grief Handouts*

*Distraction Items (Puzzles, coloring books, sensory objects)*

- ["Go bag" for grief & trauma activities](#)



# STUDENT SUMMARY FORM

Staff Member Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Keep form concise. Provide essential information only.**

Student Name	Time Seen	Critical Information	Emotions Displayed/Observations

# SAMPLE DOCUMENTS AND SCRIPTS

This section contains sample communication documents; it is important that crisis situations which could result in a letter home be funneled through administration.

Below are some general considerations when using the following documents:

- Avoid using information that has not been verified
- Do not release any names until family members have been notified

## Immediate Email Notification to Staff - Death of Student or Staff Member

This memo can be used to notify and inform the faculty about a loss at your school. It lists several general suggestions teachers might want to use with their students after they arrive in class. If needed, counselors and Building Crisis Team members can help teachers discuss the death with their students. It is critical that crisis responders are available and in place before any general announcements are made to groups of students. There is always the possibility of mass hysteria which would place extra stress upon the teachers and the administration and make it more difficult to get the students settled at a later time.

*TO: Faculty and Staff*

*RE: URGENT MESSAGE - READ IMMEDIATELY*

*It is with great sadness that I must inform you that we have lost a member of our school family. It was recently learned that (Name) died/was killed/passed away due to (facts about death/accident – when, where, how, etc.). The Building Crisis Team will be available to assist us in supporting the staff and students of our school.*

*Listed below are several suggestions which may assist grieving staff and students in dealing with their feelings of loss:*

- *Discuss what has happened, relay relevant facts, answer questions, and attempt to dispel rumors*
- *Discuss what staff and students might expect from themselves and others (i.e., grief process and individuality of process)*
- *Share memories and thoughts*
- *Discuss ways to respond individually and as a class*
- *Identify students in need of assistance and send them to the office or contact (name)*
- *If you need assistance for your students or yourself, please contact (name)*

*Please be advised that I am letting you know this information in advance so you can prepare for the school day. However, in order to provide better support, please do not inform your*

*students of this loss until you are notified that the Building Crisis Team is in place.*

## Memo to Faculty - Student or Staff Suicide

When holding a faculty meeting or individually notifying staff is not practical, you will want to inform your staff with an urgent memo as soon as the suicide has been confirmed. Attempt to anticipate questions that might be asked and try to answer them as accurately and honestly as possible to minimize rumors. As soon as possible, a meeting with the entire staff should be held to address issues such as suicide prevention and the potential for “contagion/copycat” suicides.

## Email to Staff - After a Student Suicide

*TO: Faculty and Staff*

*RE: URGENT MESSAGE - READ IMMEDIATELY*

*I am asking you to discuss the death of (student's name), a (grade) student, with your class at the beginning of school. Some students will already be aware of his/her suicide. Others will be learning of the death from you. It is recommended that you give your class an opportunity to hear the following facts from you, to ask questions, and to discuss their feelings. You can expect some students to be angry and upset as well as sad. Please be sensitive to their feelings.*

*\*Insert appropriate known details:*

*It has been reported that (student's name) died by suicide (place & approximate time). The medical examiner has ruled the death a suicide. We do not know why (student's name) chose to kill himself/herself.*

*Students may be excused from classes for (student's name) funeral if they bring a written excuse from their parents. Funeral arrangements are still pending. I will give you that information when I receive it. The family will be at the funeral home tomorrow evening beginning at (time) if anyone wished to pay his/her respects and extend sympathy. You may wish to discuss with your students/class ways they can show their concern individually or as a class.*

*The Building Crisis Team members will be in the school building throughout today and the*



*rest of the week as needed. If you wish for some assistance in discussing (student's name) death with your class, a team member will come to your classroom. Please identify any student you think needs further help dealing with this tragedy and send him or her to the (designated area). Today may be a very difficult one for you as well as for our students. Building Crisis Team members will be in the (designated area) if you wish to talk further about this incident.*

## Script for Sharing With Students - Death of a Student or Staff Member

TO: Faculty and Staff

RE: Sharing With Students

Teachers: Please read this statement to your students at (time) this morning.

(Principal) has asked me to let you know of some sad news about (name) in (grade & class / position).

At (approximate time), (name) passed away from \_\_\_\_\_. We are very sad for (name)'s family and (name)'s class at this time.

Resources such as (counselors / Child Study Team members / Crisis Teams) are available today to help our students and staff deal with their feelings of shock and loss. If you would like to speak with the crisis team, please let a staff member know.

Other information for teachers:

- 1) Encourage students to stay in class
- 2) Students who need support may be sent to counselor or student support room #
- 3) Discourage students from leaving school; counselor(s) will make arrangements to call parents of students who are very upset so they can be sent home
- 4) Be observant and report any extreme or unusual reactions by students or staff to (principal) or (counselor)
- 5) Discuss what staff and students might expect from themselves and others (i.e., grief process and individuality of process)
- 6) Balance sensitivity and school business as usual
- 7) Direct all parent (or media) questions regarding this incident to (principal)
- 8) Do not share anecdotal information/rumors you may have heard with students or parents
- 9) Phone calls will be made this morning to all parents of (teacher's) class
- 10) Letters will be sent home with all students at the end of the day.

## Letter to Parents - Death of Student or Staff Member (With Detail)

This email can be used to notify and inform parents about a crisis situation that has occurred at your school. It also provides several general strategies parents might want to use to assist their child in coping with a crisis event. It is important that any reported factual details be as accurate as possible so as to assist with rumor control. A follow-up email can be sent once funeral arrangements are known.

*Dear Families,*

*It is with great sadness that I must inform you about the tragic loss of one of our (students / staff members). On (date and approximate time) we learned that (name & grade level/position), was killed while/died from (what happened).*

*The school staff was informed of (name)'s death (before / after) the students arrived to school. Students were told about this tragic event (after / before ) they arrived to class. (Any other things that will be done could be listed here.)*

*Members of our Building Crisis Team have been working with our counselors and other staff members to help students and staff deal with their feelings and emotions. Please realize that reactions to death and stress are varied and can depend upon factors such as age, personality, previous losses, and relationship to the victim. If you feel your child has been affected by this situation, you can assist your child by doing the following:*

- *Take time to listen to and talk with your child about what has happened*
- *Reassure your child that you will be available to help him/her through this difficult time*
- *Help your child verbalize some of the feelings he/she might be feeling but is unable to express*
- *Reassure your child that you will do all you can to keep him/her safe. Providing specific examples may help to reduce some of the fear and anxiety*
- *Discuss some of the things you and your child might do to express your concern for the victim's family. If you decide to allow your child to attend the funeral and/or memorial service, it is best that you or some responsible person accompany your child*

*Any changes in your child's behavior, which seem extreme and/or do not seem to go away, should be brought to the attention of a mental health professional. Please contact a School Counselor or a member of the Child Study Team if you feel that you may be in need of further resources. We will continue to have staff available at school to assist our students in coping with this loss.*

*Thank you for your support and assistance.*

## Letter to Parents - Death of a Student (Without Detail)

*Dear Families,*

*Earlier today, we announced to students the tragic loss of a \_\_\_\_\_ grader. At this time, we do not know the cause of death. We are writing to you as it is our hope that no rumors will be spread. It is very important to not speculate about something so devastating.*

*Members of our Crisis Team have been working with our counselor(s) and other staff members to help students and staff process their feelings and emotions. Our counselors urge us to remember that reactions to death are varied. You can assist your child by taking time to listen and talk about what has happened and talk about the differences between rumor and fact. We want to respect the privacy and emotions of this family / As we learn more, we will share that information.*

*Please don't hesitate to call if you feel your child could benefit from contact with the crisis team during the school day.*

*Our thoughts are with this family during this difficult time.*

## Letter to Parents – After a Suicide Death

This letter can be used to notify and inform parents about a suicide that has occurred at your school. It also provides several general strategies parents might want to use to assist their child in coping with a crisis event. It is important that any reported factual details be as accurate as possible so as to assist with rumor control. A follow-up letter can be sent once funeral arrangements are known.

*Dear Families,*

*I have very sad news to share with you. We learned (last night) that (student's name), a (grade) in our school, died by suicide. According to police reports, (how and where). We have shared this information with all of the students (time), when (in their individual class / by announcement). We hope that you will be able to talk with your child about the death.*

*Suicide is a difficult death for most people to understand and accept because it raises many unanswerable questions. There can be a variety of factors that lead to an individual's suicide death. Sometimes students, especially (student's name) friends may wonder if they could have prevented the death. Others may feel that it was somehow their fault. It is important that students have an opportunity to communicate about these concerns and receive help if they need it.*

*Counselors, teachers, and other staff have been and will continue to be available for the students, parents, and staff to talk about thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Please contact us at school if you have any questions or concerns.*

*Our thoughts are with the (student's name) family as they mourn with their (son's or daughter's) death.*

\*Optional - If the school is planning a community meeting:

A meeting will be held (date, time, location). It is open to parents, students, and staff. A bereavement counselor will be presenting information on the suicide issues including symptoms to watch for and prevention efforts. Please plan to attend.

## Letter to Parents – Funeral Notification of Student

This communication essentially relays information and allows people to arrange their schedules in case they choose to visit the family at the funeral home. This may be a second mailing since this information may not be available when the initial death notice is sent out.

*(Date)*

*Dear Families,*

*The (school's name) community was saddened to learn of the reported death of one of our students, (student's name). The death of any young person is a loss, which in one way or another, diminishes each of us. The tragic circumstances of (student's name) death are perhaps more shocking and more difficult to accept. We have asked the assistance of the Building Crisis Team to help our school community deal with this loss. We are doing everything we can to help your child and our staff through this difficult experience. You may anticipate more questions and a need to talk about this incident for the next several weeks. (Student's name) funeral will be held at (place of funeral) on (date at time). Your child may be excused from school to attend the funeral with written permission from you. We encourage you to make arrangements to accompany him or her and you will need to provide your own transportation. The school will remain open for those students who choose not to attend. If you have any concerns regarding your child's reactions to this loss, our school counselors and Crisis Team members will be available to assist you.*

## Letter to Parents – Funeral Notification of Staff Member

This communication essentially relays information and allows people to arrange their schedules in case they choose to visit the family at the funeral home. This may be a second mailing since this information may not be available when the initial death notice is sent out.

*Dear Families,*

*The (school's name) community was saddened to learn of the reported death of one of our staff, (staff's name). The death of any person is a loss, which in one way or another, diminishes each of us. The tragic circumstances of (staff's name) death are perhaps more shocking and more difficult to accept. We have asked the assistance of the Building Crisis Team to help our school community deal with this loss. We are doing everything we can to help your child and our staff through this difficult experience. You may anticipate more questions and a need to talk about this incident for the next several weeks.*

*(Staff's name) funeral will be held at (place of funeral) on (date & time). Your child may be excused from school to attend the funeral with written permission from you. We encourage you to make arrangements to accompany him or her and you will need to provide your own transportation. The school will remain open for those students who choose not to attend. If you have any concerns regarding your child's reactions to this loss, our school counselors and Building Crisis Team members will be available to assist you.*

# Information Packet - Death of a Student

*Dear Families,*

*I am enclosing a packet of information to help you as you work through potential grief issues with your child over the death of his or her classmate. We made every attempt today to call each family in (teacher's name) class to inform you of the death of your child's classmate, (student's name). The information in this packet might be helpful in providing guidance and support in your efforts to help your child through the process of grief.*

*A team of staff members will be available for support and a listening ear to students and parents, not only today but throughout the next week to watch for areas of concern or need in the grief process. Should you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact us.*

## **Various suggestions of grieving taken from a number of handouts:**

*Your child may experience reactions to the death of a classmate and you may see your child showing or demonstrating the following behaviors:*

- *Mood swings*
- *Tearfulness*
- *Irritability*
- *Withdrawal from family and friends*
- *Intense dreams*
- *Increase or decrease in activity level*

*All of the above are NORMAL reactions. Grief is a process that takes work and your child is attempting to work through his/her feelings.*

## **You can support your child by:**

- *Listening carefully (let them talk about the loss, listen without prejudging or trying to change their mind, let your child cry and vent feelings of sadness, anger, guilt)*
- *Spend time with your grieving child*
- *Reassure your child that they are safe*
- *Don't take anger or other feelings personally (let them know you are sorry such an event has taken place and that you want to help and to understand their needs)*

## **Common Reactions to a Sudden Death**

- *Tightness in throat, swallowing is difficult*
- *Chest heaviness, may resemble heart attack, may have breathing irregularities*
- *Empty feeling in stomach, loss of appetite*
- *Have difficulty sleeping, dream patterns change*
- *Feel restless and look for activity but find it difficult to concentrate*
- *Feel as though the death isn't real, that it couldn't have happened*
- *Feel guilty or angry over things that happened or didn't happen in the relationship with the deceased, hyper-irritability*
- *May feel angry at the person who died*

- *Feel the need to tell and retell things about the one who died and about the experience of their death*
- *Feel mood change over the slightest thing*
- *Cry or feel the urge to cry at unexpected times*
- *Feel the need to take care of other people who seem uncomfortable around us by politely not talking about the feelings of loss*

*Grief is a universal experience. Each person's grief is individual, depending on upbringing and previous experience. There are similar reactions, though, which most of us experience in varying degrees after a death. There is a pattern in human grief that is inevitable. Grief is not a weakness, a lack of faith, but is a physical and psychological necessity. We cannot avoid Grieving.*

*Grief, with its many ups and downs, lasts far longer than society recognizes. It is a natural but complex process that includes love, anger, frustration, fear, bewilderment and loneliness. Grief is cathartic and therapeutic. As you talk over the experience, the pain will gradually decrease. In fact, most grief reactions will eventually diminish in severity by themselves, for you have resources within you which enable you to recover from traumatic experiences such as bereavement.*

Everyone grieves differently. Students will react in their own way to the news. Their reactions are impacted by a variety of factors including:

- Their age and developmental level
- Their relationship, if any, with the deceased
- Their previous experience with death
- The support systems available to them
- The modeling of grief responses from those around them
- Whether the death was anticipated or unexpected
- The nature of the death

Not every student will want to talk about the death. You may see students reacting in a variety of ways including being quiet or withdrawn, talking a lot, crying, getting angry, laughing, acting aggressive, looking sad or thoughtful, or any combination of reactions. Each response should be accepted and allowed, as long as it is not harmful to the student or another person. Each response is valid and important to that particular student. Remember that each person grieves differently. It is important for each student to feel heard and accepted. Remember also that the grief issues will not end at the end of the school day. They can continue into outside activities and home life. Helping parents understand and cope with these issues will be important in the student's life both at school and home.

**List of common responses of the grieving child or teen:**

- Academic Responses to Grief
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating
- Failing or declining grades



- Incomplete work, or poor quality of work
- Forgetfulness, memory loss
- Over achievement, perfectionism
- Language errors and word finding problems
- Inattentiveness
- Daydreaming
- Physical Responses to Grief such as stomachaches, headaches, heartaches
- Frequent accidents or injuries
- Increased requests to visit the nurse
- Nightmares, dreams or sleep difficulties
- Loss of appetite or increased eating
- Low energy, weakness
- Hives, rashes, itching
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Increased illness, low resistance to colds and flu
- Rapid heartbeat
- Spiritual Responses to Grief
- Anger at God
- Questions of “Why me?” and “Why now?”
- Questions about the meaning of life
- Confusion about where the person who died is
- Feelings of abandonment and emptiness
- Doubting or questioning previous beliefs
- Seeing the future as meaningless

### **Social Responses to Grief**

- Withdrawal from friends
- Withdrawal from activities or sports
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Changes in relationships with teachers and peers
- Changes in family roles (e.g., taking on the role of a deceased parent)
- Wanting to be physically close to safe adults
- Inappropriate sexual behavior/acting out
- Stealing, shoplifting

## **IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WHO ARE AT RISK**

Any student can potentially be at risk after a death. Communicate with your faculty about observing, listening to, and attending to the needs of grieving students. They can help identify those who need a little extra support. Certain students you may want to pay attention to include those who are:

- Directly impacted by the crisis
- Not directly impacted by the current crisis but handling a recent tragedy in their own life
- Undergoing the stress of accumulated losses (e.g., deaths, divorces, moves, parental unemployment, etc.)
- Receiving support for special needs
- Dealing with other mental health issues (e.g., depression, eating disorders, behavioral problems, anxiety disorders, etc.)
- At-risk behaviors associated with grief may include:
  - Aggressiveness
  - Truancy or increased absences
  - Defiance, non-compliant behavior
  - Lack of follow through on assignments
  - Falling or failing grades
  - Depression
  - Suicidal threats or behavior
  - Increase in drug or alcohol use
  - Increase in risk-taking behaviors

\*Students who engage in at-risk behavior should be monitored. If the behavior is frequent, and continues overtime, or if it is dangerous, refer the student to a counselor for additional support.

## THE LONG TERM PLAN

Grief does not end the day after the funeral. It is not over in a week, a month, or even a year. Grief is an ongoing process that diminishes in intensity but is forever a part of life. The implication for students and faculty is that there will be grief eruptions that are unplanned but powerful. For example, if a shooting has occurred in your school, another shooting somewhere in the country will bring up memories and fears and grief that seemed to be gone.

On the anniversary of the death, students will remember what happened. Acknowledge the date and let students know that you are remembering the person who died on that date. It is important to plan ahead for anticipated events such as the anniversary of the loss or when a similar event occurs.

# INFORMATION ON GRIEVING

## Six Principles of Grieving

When a school community experiences a crisis involving one or more deaths, everyone grieves. We grieve the death of those individuals as well as the inevitable life changes that occur as a result of the loss. While we can prepare ourselves to better manage a crisis, nothing quite prepares us for the grief we experience after a death. And, unfortunately, there are no quick fixes. That's why we offer some basic principles of grieving. These are helpful to keep in mind because they apply to any of us who have experienced a death.

**1. Grief is a natural reaction to loss.** When a person dies, those who are impacted by the death experience emotional and physical reactions. Grief is experienced throughout the life span from infancy to adulthood, although the reaction will vary from person to person. Grief does not feel natural in part because we cannot necessarily control our emotions or other symptoms. The sense of being out of control may be overwhelming or frightening. Grieving is natural, normal, and healthy for bereaved students and adults.

**2. Each student's grief experience is unique.** While many theories and models of the grieving process provide a helpful framework of tasks or stages of grieving, the path itself is a lonely, solitary, and unique one for every individual. No book, article, or grief therapist can predict or prescribe exactly what a student or an adult will –or should- experience on this path. Those who wish to assist people in grief do so best by walking with them along the path in the role of listener and learner, allowing the griever to teach about his or her unique grief journey.

**3. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve.** Coping with death does not follow a set pattern or set of rules. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. There are, however, “helpful” choices and behaviors that are constructive, life-affirming actions. Examples might include talking about the death, getting involved in a support group, or creating artwork to memorialize the person who died. Other responses are not helpful, destructive, or even harmful, causing long-term complications. These might include the use of drugs or alcohol to “numb” the pain, stifling feelings, and avoiding the grief process altogether. The sheer pain of loss often feels “crazy”. It can be challenging to decide which thoughts, feelings and actions are helpful and which are not. Following a death, grieving students get plenty of advice from others about what they should and shouldn't do, feel, think, and believe. What is often more helpful than advice is nonjudgmental listening, helping them to sort through the options and alternatives they see.

**4. Every death is unique and will be experienced by your students in different ways.** Students react differently to the death of a parent, sibling, friend, teacher or principal. Each relationship is unique. Some of the grief literature talks about loss in an almost competitive way as if some losses are worse than others. You may read that the death of a child is the worst loss, or that suicide is the hardest death to get over. Comparisons about which death is the worst are not helpful, and may lead to unrealistic expectations or demands. While a student may speak for himself/herself about how he/she experienced different losses, one cannot

categorically say that any loss is worse, or easier than another. Each person should be respected in his or her way of coping with the death.

#### **5. The grieving process is influenced by a multitude of factors.**

There are many factors impacting how a student may react to a death. Some of these include:

- The social support systems available to the student (family, school, community, friends)
- The nature of the death and how the student interprets it
- The status of “unfinished business” between the student and the person who died
- The relationship with the deceased
- The emotional and developmental age of the student
- How the community views the death (stigmatized deaths such as homicides, suicides, and AIDS deaths are often looked at very differently than deaths by illness or accident.)

**6. Grieving never ends. It is not something the student will “get over.”** This is perhaps one of the least understood aspects of grief in our society. Most people are anxious for us to put the loss behind us, to go on, to get over it. When a person dies, the death leaves a vacuum in the lives of those left behind. Life is never the same again. This does not mean life can never again be joyful, or that the experience of loss cannot be transformed into something positive. But grief does not have a magical end. People comment on the pangs of grief 40, 50 or 60 years after a death. For the student at each new developmental level or experience of personal accomplishment, the grieving process will be re-experienced in some new way.

# ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOLLOWING A STUDENT SUICIDE

The death of any individual often prompts us to gather as a community, to remember and celebrate the life of the deceased. In a school setting, one area experts advise against some of these activities is in the event of a suicide. Research surrounding media coverage of completed suicides has shown correlations between sensational news coverage and resulting “copycat” suicides. School leaders in each district are advised to be prepared with a policy to address any student death, regardless of how the death occurred, in order to properly acknowledge the deceased student’s departure from the school community without retraumatizing those close to the student, triggering other students who may also be contemplating suicide, or inadvertently celebrating the manner of death. The following are the guidelines set forth by the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide.

*“Use this as your benchmark: if it dramatizes, sensationalizes, or glamorizes the student, or creates an opportunity for continuing attention to the death, it is probably not a good idea.”*

What types of memorial activities are inappropriate following a suicide:

- Flying the flag at half-staff
- Putting a notice on the school’s outdoor message board
- Letting students create and wearing apparel like t-shirts, sweatshirts, or armbands
- Planting trees or gardens
- Placing plaques in school corridors
- Naming rooms or sports venues
- Creating banners
- Dedicating yearbooks, dances, sporting events to the person
- Making special acknowledgements at graduation ceremonies

What types of memorial activities are appropriate following a suicide:

- Making donations to a local crisis center
- Participating in an event that raises awareness about suicide prevention
- Buying books for the school library or hosting school programs that highlight resilience
- Creating community based service activities in the school that emphasize the importance of students taking care of each other and provide opportunities for taking an active role in helping others

- Writing notes to the family to encourage the 'gift of memories'
- Implementing a suicide prevention program in the school
- Collaborating with community agencies and groups that promote good mental health, such as the local chapter of the Mental Health Association

Resource: Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide. Memorials after a suicide: Guidelines for Schools and Families. [http://www.sptsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Memorials\\_After\\_a\\_Suicide.pdf](http://www.sptsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Memorials_After_a_Suicide.pdf)

# TIP SHEET FOR STAFF REGARDING STUDENT OR STAFF DEATH

## DO

1. Be simple and straightforward. Use terms such as “death”, “die” or “dying” to avoid any confusion.
2. Encourage students to express their feelings. Realize that a variety of feelings is normal. Reassure students that feelings of anger, sadness, guilt and fear are all typical reactions. Students who do not wish to express their feelings verbally may show their feelings through a change in behavior.
3. Allow students to ask questions and express their own fears and concerns.
4. Express your own feelings in a calm, open and appropriate way that encourages students to express their own feelings.
5. Be sensitive to cultural differences in expressing grief and death.
6. Be honest and be patient. Students may continue to ask the same questions as they process the information.
7. Maintain a normal routine in your classroom.
8. Feel free to say:
  - a. “Sometimes we feel like it’s our fault when someone dies, but it’s not.”
  - b. “It’s hard to imagine someone we love has died.”
  - c. “I am so sorry your friend/parent/sibling died. I know you will miss him/her.”
  - d. “When someone dies, it’s OK to talk about how you feel.”
  - e. If the deceased is known to the staff member:
    - i. “I was sorry to hear about \_\_\_\_\_’s death. I feel very sad that they died. I know you must have some feelings about this. Would you like to talk about \_\_\_\_\_ or tell me what these last few days have been like?”
  - f. If the deceased was not known to the staff member:
    - i. “I didn’t know \_\_\_\_\_, but I can tell that \_\_\_\_\_ was someone who was very important to you. I feel sad that you had to experience such a loss.”
  - g. “I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you,” or “I wonder what this is like for you,” (keeps the focus on the child).
  - h. “Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens in their lives. Has that been true for you?” or “I wonder what kind of feelings you’re having about this,” (allows them to feel safe and validated in whatever their response may be and opens the door to expression).
  - i. “What have the last few days been like for you?” (allows for reflecting back with compassion, sincerity, and without judgment).

## DON'T

1. Do not use words such as “departed” or “passed away” since these terms may be confusing to students.
2. Do not tell students how they should feel or what they should do.
3. Do not say “I know how you feel” or “You will get over it”.
4. Do not judge a student’s reaction or lack of a reaction.
5. Do not give a theological lecture or discuss religious beliefs.



6. Try not to say things such as:
- a. “Now you have to be the big boy/girl.”
  - b. “Remember, now he/she is in heaven.”
  - c. “It’s a blessing that God took your mother because she’s not suffering anymore.”
  - d. “Don’t cry. Your family needs you to be strong now.”
  - e. **“I know exactly what you are going through.”**No one can know what another individual is going through. Even if you have lost family members, close friends, or a spouse, your own experience is as distinct as the children you teach.
  - f. **“Both of my parents died when I was your age.”** Avoid statements that compete with the child’s experiences of loss. Referring to another instance of loss year may make children feel their situation is not as significant.
  - g. **“My 15-year-old dog died last week. I feel very sad, too.”** It is impossible to compare losses, and generally not useful to attempt to do so. As much as possible, keep your focus on the child’s own unique experience and need for support.
  - h. **“You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.”** Grieving children are often told they should not be expressive—that they need to grow up fast, keep it together for their family, manage their feelings, and not feel sorry for themselves. Don’t hold the child back from experiencing the deep feelings they are having, as that is an essential part of coping and adjusting.
  - i. **“I know this must be difficult, but it’s important to remember the good things in life as well.”** Your desire to cheer up a grieving student is understandable, but it may quiet their expressions of grief. Give them permission to fully experience and express their powerful feelings, to help them process their loss.
  - j. **“You must be incredibly angry.”** Anger is a natural reaction in the grief process, but it is impossible to know what someone is experiencing at any given time. Avoid projecting feelings onto your student. Suggesting that they ought to feel a certain way is not helpful. Instead, validate the idea that there is no one right way to feel.

The bottom line is to lead with your heart and be genuine, but always be mindful that your words and actions can make a difference and must be chosen carefully. The most important opportunity you can offer grieving children is that of expressing their thoughts and feelings fully. When children feel safe in accepting and expressing the full range of their intense emotions, that time of grieving can ultimately become a time of personal understanding and growth. But, in the moment of dealing with that significant loss, it is truly hard work for a child. You can be a lifeline in their day-to-day struggle of facing and emerging from grief. Be the one who “gets it.” Be the person who offers sensitive support and guidance, who helps the child navigate this difficult time and find their own path to peace.

(adapted from *The Grieving Student: A Teacher’s Guide*, by David Schonfeld & Marcia Quackenbush)

More information on teaching students who have experienced loss can be found at <https://grievingstudents.org/>

# LONG TERM-CRISIS AND CHRONIC STRESS

Long duration stressful or dangerous events are a new challenge for most of us. In these times our resources are taxed and we may be required to maintain more vigilance than we are used to. Sometimes long term exposure to stress can trigger signs of a traumatic response - rumination or feeling like you can't "turn off" your thoughts, decreased sleep, increased or excessive worry, feeling guilty about not doing enough to help, or even signs of numbing or compassion fatigue. It is important to be mindful of these signs and to seek help if you feel out of sorts for a few weeks or longer. It is equally important to remember that some of these feelings or effects are actually useful mechanisms that our bodies have evolved in order to keep us moving forward in a crisis. Summarized here are a few general tips for maintaining wellness in a prolonged stress environment (<https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19>).

- Anxiety serves a purpose in times when the health or safety of those we care about may be compromised or at risk. It helps us remain aware, enables us to constantly be on the lookout for things that may harm us, and it promotes actions that try to preserve our safety. If your physical health or safety is at risk, most importantly, protect yourself. The actions you take to mitigate danger or reassure yourself that you are safe can have a direct effect to decrease anxiety in the short term.
- If the stressful situation is a focus of any media attention - whether local or widespread - limit your media consumption. While "doomscrolling" can in the very immediate term calm feelings of anxiety by reassuring us we are up to date on the latest information, constant exposure to stressful details or upsetting images is linked to increased anxiety. For those who have experienced past trauma, this constant exposure can also contribute to increased post-traumatic stress symptoms. Set boundaries around your media usage, and be mindful of what you share with others as well.
- Receive - and provide - social support. Use a safe means to communicate with those in your family or community. Processing feelings and events together can confirm a sense of safety and help us feel useful, through supporting others, when our options for a true meaningful impact may be limited. Express kindness, patience, and compassion (to yourself as well). In a health related crisis where many may be in need, consider if it's safe to donate blood or other resources.
- Maintain or create routines. Our brains crave predictability; routines and knowing what to expect reduce anxiety and stress. Prioritize your sleep and daily activity, both to have a dependable sequence of events to follow each day, and to help manage unproductive or ruminative thoughts. Eat mindfully to support nutrition and strength. Stress is known to drive us to comfort food, carbs, and sugar, which can make us feel better in the short term but can also sap energy especially in times of stress.
- Manage your thoughts. Try to remain realistic and fact-based to limit the impact of emotions on your ability to cope and manage a crisis. Recognize that the worst-case scenario exists, but remember what the best-case scenario is too, and try to land somewhere in the middle. Remember that if you have been exposed to traumas in the past, these can have a cumulative effect and it may be necessary to call in more support. Keep an eye out for yourself and colleagues who may show signs of vicarious trauma or grief, and know your resources. The crisis

team or support staff within your building can confidentially guide you to additional sources of support.

# COMMUNITY RESOURCES

<p>Hearts and Crafts Grief Counseling            442 Broadway            Hillsdale, NJ            201-818-9399  <a href="http://heartsandcraftscounseling.org/">http://heartsandcraftscounseling.org/</a>  <i>*visit <a href="#">their website</a> for book resources</i></p>	<p>NewBridge Counseling            1069 Ringwood Ave, Ste. 301            Haskell, NJ            973-831-0613  <a href="https://newbridge.org/">https://newbridge.org/</a></p>
<p>Family Center at Montclair, LLC            155 Pompton Avenue Ste. 106            Verona, NJ            973-857-5333</p>	<p>Counseling and Wellness Center of West            Milford            1592B Union Valley Rd            West Milford, NJ            973-657-1222</p>
<p>Mental Health Association in Passaic County            404 Clifton Avenue #2            Clifton, NJ 07011            973-478-4444  <a href="https://www.mhapassaic.org/">https://www.mhapassaic.org/</a></p>	<p>Good Grief            38 Elm St            Morristown, NJ            908-522-1999  <a href="https://good-grief.org/">https://good-grief.org/</a></p>
<p>Pathways Counseling            16 Pompton Ave            Pompton Lakes, NJ            973-835-6337  <a href="https://www.pathwayscounseling.org/">https://www.pathwayscounseling.org/</a></p>	<p>Wayne Counseling Center            1022 Hamburg Tpk            Wayne, NJ            973-694-1234  <a href="https://www.waynecounseling.org/">https://www.waynecounseling.org/</a></p>
<p>Jewish Family Services of North Jersey            506 Hamburg Tpk Suite 102            201-837-9090  <a href="https://www.jfcsnj.org/">https://www.jfcsnj.org/</a></p>	<p>West Bergen Mental Healthcare            140 Chestnut St, Ste 202            Ridgewood, NJ            201-528-8075  <a href="https://westbergen.org">https://westbergen.org</a></p>
<p>NewBridge Counseling            Rt 46 East Building 2, Ste 100A            Parsippany, NJ            973-316-9333  <a href="https://newbridge.org/">https://newbridge.org/</a></p>	<p>SERV Clifton Behavioral Healthcare            777 Bloomfield Ave, Ste B            Clifton, NJ            973-594-0125  <a href="https://servbhs.net/programs-services/outpatient-services">https://servbhs.net/programs-services/outpatient-services</a></p>
<p>Imagine - A Center for Coping with Loss            244 Sheffield Street            Mountainside, NJ 07092            908-264-3100</p>	<p>NJ Hopeline            Call 1-855-654-6735            Chat through their website <a href="#">here</a>  <a href="https://njhopeline.com/">https://njhopeline.com/</a></p>

<https://imaginenj.org/grief-support-programs/>

## FERPA GUIDELINES

[FERPA Guidelines & Links for Additional Information](#)

[FERPA Overview - YouTube](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

["Go bag" for grief & trauma activities](#)

[How to Cope with Trauma and Traumatic Events,  
including Coronavirus](#)