

## Dealing With Sudden Death: Grief Work in a High School Setting

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The call comes unexpectedly, and in a few words portends long days ahead when you—whether administrator or teacher—must be responsible for the young people in your care at the same time that you are handling your own grief and anger. A death has come to someone in your school community: a death from AIDS, a fatal injury on the athletic field, an automobile accident, a violent death, or a heart attack. Whatever the circumstances, this is an event that will challenge the students' beliefs in their own invulnerability. In many cases, it will test them with guilt and fear when they haven't yet had the life experiences that allow adults to build some defenses against emotional trauma.

Although such events seem to be more common in today's world than they were a decade or two ago, they are still, thankfully, not part of your routine experience. How do you “make it up as you go along” when emotions, including your own, are highly charged and the entire school community is coping with grief?

The initial response of most administrators is to call in the professionals. The psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric social worker and clergy who serve your community can be very helpful. However, most of these professionals are accustomed to working one on one with young people. Their suggestions may not be practical for an entire school.

You will be dealing with young people suffering with grief to many different degrees. Some will be devastated. At the other extreme will be some who are little touched emotionally. You can't proceed with the assumption that all members of the school community need equal services or equal time to mourn. Neither can you move through the usual daily routine and ignore the tragedy.

A plan is necessary. The school will need to have a short-term program that meets the immediate needs of all and allows you to move forward within some sort of structure. This should be followed by intermediate-stage care for those who are the most personally touched by the death. Finally, the community as a whole needs to do some long-term grief work to achieve closure.

In his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* (Springer: New York, 1991), J. William Worden describes four tasks of mourning. These tasks provide a useful structure for looking at grief, and they provide a framework within which a program can be planned. Dr. Worden describes the tasks of mourning this way:

- A.** To Accept the Reality of the Loss
- B.** To Work Through the Pain of Grief
- C.** To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased Is Missing
- D.** To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move On With Life

It is important to think of mourning as a process through which the school community will move. Adults who work closely with teenagers tend to feel powerless and angry in the face of death. Recognize that there are things the adults can do—and need to do—to help students move through the process of mourning.

### **A. To Accept the Reality of the Loss**

The most common feeling experienced directly after a sudden death is that of disbelief. Students say over and over that they can't believe that it happened, that it just doesn't seem possible. The responsibility of the teachers and administrators at this point is not primarily to

comfort. Students need help in processing their feelings about the loss. The first responsibility of the adults in the school is to help the school community realize that the loss is real.

An initial meeting with all members of the faculty is important. Lay to rest any rumors, let the adults know as much as is known about the tragedy, and explain the plan for the day.

A schoolwide meeting at the beginning of the day is a good first step. This is the time to have a school representative provide an overview of what actually happened, dispel any rumors, and allow those involved to tell their stories if they wish.

This process of telling the story is important to many people in the face of loss. Each time someone tells his or her story about the event, it becomes more real. This is part of the process of acceptance. It doesn't matter that six young people were present and each one has essentially the same story. Each may need to be heard. Often, adults become impatient and think young people are being overly dramatic, dwelling on the details unnecessarily. Verbal rehearsal of the event helps to move the event from the level of a bad dream to reality.

Explain to the students that they need to talk—to each other, to their teachers, and to their parents. They need to talk about what they know of the events, what they know and remember about the classmate or teacher who died, and what they are feeling. The young people need to be helped to feel free about crying and free to interact in a caring way with faculty members who may be in tears, too. In this meeting it can be stressed that the

school community is grieving together.

If possible, allow time for two or three people to speak about the loss of their friend. A teammate, girlfriend or boyfriend, roommate, or best friend can address the loss in a personal way. This should be set up in advance so that the speakers are carefully chosen and the number limited. The meeting is also a good opportunity for a student leader to assure the student population that some formal means will be used to recognize and honor the loss—anything from a scholarship to a photo essay might serve this purpose.

Students are usually most accustomed to functioning in 40- to 50-minute time blocks and an assembly such as this is most easily managed if it feels familiar in terms of length. This assembly is not a memorial service. That will come later. The purpose of the assembly is to recognize the loss, explain the circumstances, and dignify the grief. This is not the time for interminable personal memories or hysterical outpourings. This is the formal acknowledgment of the tragedy and the beginning of the community grief work.

At the end of the assembly, students can move into groups. This is the opportunity for more personal expressions of grief. Homeroom groups, advisory groups, class groups—the groups can be set up in any number of ways but should provide an opportunity for individual students to express their thoughts and feelings. Every student should be included in some group. This assignment should not be on an “as desired” basis but should be a formal structured placement. The groups should be small enough for all voices to be heard—10 to 15 students per group, if possible.

If the deceased was a member of some special group—a team member or band member, for example—perhaps this group needs to meet together. If the event was particularly traumatic for one segment of the population—the African-American students perhaps, or the tenth-grade girls—it may be advisable for them to meet with a professional in a special grouping.

It is in these groups that the professionals may be of most assistance. If there are a number whose help can be counted on, they can be placed in groups with the teachers for this period. With their professional experience, they can help by steering the discussion and may be able to identify students who are having a particularly difficult time. It is important, however, to have present the adults with whom the students are familiar and most comfortable, their regular teachers. Teachers may not be trained in providing grief therapy, but they are trained and experience in handling students. This meeting is not therapy. The primary job of teachers and professionals at this point is to be caring, listening adults. It is not important that students' questions be answered, only that the students be given an opportunity and a focus to talk about the events.

If you have only a few professional helpers present, it might be advisable to have them set up shop in a certain area of the building, available to all who need them. If there are a number of students and teachers who want to see them, they can either run brief appointments or small groups.

Again, one class period is usually sufficient for group meetings, and the meetings should certainly extend no longer than two. You want to provide time for the students to talk about what they are thinking and what they are

feeling. Look for various types of reactions and be aware of students who may need extra help. In addition to students who are truly grieving because of the loss of a particular friend, you will have an assortment of other reactions.

1. Kids who aren't particularly upset by the loss of this individual, but who have other unfinished grief issues in their own lives, may become quite upset. It is perfectly normal for any death to bring back previous experiences with loss.
2. Some students will not be particularly upset and they may feel guilty because they aren't. They need to be relieved of guilt for not feeling bad. A death may be a loss to the school community as a whole but it will probably not be a personal loss to all of the individuals within the community.
3. Some may grieve as part of the group even though they don't know the individual well. Others may give them a hard time because they are upset. Many people carry close ties to their groups and it isn't unusual for them to feel bad when something happens that harms or changes the group, even if they don't personally feel the loss.
4. Others will be anxious about the issue of death and worry that it will touch them or someone that they love. They need to hear the details over and over. They are developing personal strategies for keeping themselves, and those they care about, safe by figuring out what the deceased did that was different from what they do.

5. Some students will focus grief into anger and may be quite indignant that someone “did something wrong.” They will complain about response time of the paramedics, or behavior of the doctors at the hospital, or slow recognition of the seriousness of the events by faculty or administration, or an unsafe situation that could have been prevented. Counter this with reasonable restatement of the facts and don’t take it personally. Anger is a more comfortable emotion for many young people and one that gives them some sense of control.

Sometimes a school handles the initial response to the death well and then things begin to fall apart. This is not the time to relax structure. Following small group meetings, it is probably a good idea to return to regular classes. This does not mean that teachers are going to run classes as if nothing had happened. It does mean that students will be where they usually are at that time of day unless there is a compelling reason (such as an appointment with one of the professionals) for them to be elsewhere. Teachers can continue small group discussions if the class seems to need them, or can get away from the stress by returning to some content work. Certainly, a teacher should not give a test. Neither should he or she expect that any content material is actually going to be learned that day. But is it not insensitive to move on with a class? Death can be very frightening to a young person. A return to the normal is reassuring. It says to the student, “That awful thing happened to my friend but it hasn’t happened to me. I still have to deal with the business of living.” Those who are unusually upset can be sent to the professionals if they don’t feel comfortable with the group.

Some students will want to escape the entire subject after a few hours and will resort to talking about sports or other interests. They can deal with only so much grief at a time. If you listen to, or participate in, their discussions, you will notice that they often slip in references to the event with which they are dealing. In the middle of a soccer discussion, someone may say, “Imagine playing soccer yesterday and being dead today,” and then the conversation will continue about next week’s game.

Some students may even get quite silly after a while. Again, this is a way of handling stress and should not be viewed or addressed as disrespectful. They can be reminded that their behavior looks disrespectful to others and may cause their friends additional pain.

A final note of caution concerns structure. Certainly, this will not be a normal day. It is easy in times of crisis to loosen up and let students go where they want to go. We adults tend to think that everyone is going to be too upset to get into trouble. Not so! High school students often drive to school. If the structure is allowed to be too loose, students will start going home. Parents are at work, houses are often empty. If students are allowed the freedom to go home, there is nothing to stop them from mourning over a few beers. Nor does the school have any way to monitor the behavior of the students who might be the most upset and really shouldn’t be left alone.

This is not a small issue. There are tremendous liability considerations if students are allowed the freedom to leave campus without prior parent permission. Even if students are told to call their parents first, many parents will give permission under the impression that their

child is simply too upset to stay in school. Students who are sincerely upset are better handled in a school setting than allowed to deal with the issues alone. Adolescents are often their own best therapists.

In addition, accountability is reassuring to students. The very ordinary routine of needing to have a hall pass to go see a counselor helps reassure them. It says to them that this awful tragedy that has struck is not the norm and their own lives are still pretty much the same. It is possible to reorganize things quickly so that students have access to help without throwing wide the gates and letting everyone go and come with no controls.

As the first day winds down, plans for the funeral or memorial service are beginning to come together. The initial shock is over and for most members of the student body and faculty the death is part of reality. There are still three more tasks to be accomplished and they should be approached deliberately.

### **B. To Work Through the Pain of Grief**

The services planned will help some members of the student body to begin to deal with the death and pain. It is important that reference and memory of the deceased should not be put aside as if he or she never existed. Reference can continue to be made in class to the loss. Teachers and counselors should remain aware of the probability that some students will have a harder time than others dealing with the loss.

A project in which many can be involved can be quite helpful. The AIDS quilt does nothing for AIDS victims themselves; it is very helpful to those who made it, however. It is normal for students to fear that they themselves will be forgotten if they die. If the student body

moves into a project that helps memorialize the deceased student, that lets each young person know that a life touches others and is not easily passed over or forgotten.

You may want to plan for some sort of healing activity a month or six weeks after the death. Students who feel a loss strongly often have a loss reaction a month or six weeks after the event. They can maintain denial for a while but crash and become quite depressed after the excitement is over, when others have begun to get back to normal.

### **C. To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased Is Missing**

This will be a task that is somewhat different in school than in a family situation. When students arrive for classes, the deceased will not be in his or her usual seat. For a while, students may refuse to sit in that seat.

It is important that the student be mentioned when appropriate by teachers and by students. A teacher might say, "It seems strange, doesn't it, to have a political discussion without having Sarah here to sum it all up as she used to do so well?" The teacher thus validates Sarah's life and contribution to the class and lets the rest of the class know that they, too, would be remembered if something happened to them.

Participating in a long-term project about the deceased's life helps students who need such participation to adjust. The project begins by being about the deceased and who he or she was; it ends by being about the current students and who they now are. The end result is much less important than the process, but there needs to be some end result to help provide closure.

#### **D. To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move On With Life**

It may take the rest of the school year to achieve closure in the loss of a student. Things like dedication of the yearbook, organization of a scholarship or fund of some sort in the deceased's name, and completion of some sort of project or presentation about him or her are all ways of achieving closure. These place the deceased in the past, acknowledge his or her life, and enable students and faculty to say good-bye. It is quite common for tears to be shed all over again six months or nine months after the loss, as some special award or presentation is made in honor of the student. These ceremonies are extremely important. These are young people struggling with their own identities. They need to feel needed and important, and it is very common for them to feel just the opposite. It is vital that they see their lost friend as remembered and appreciated by the community.

In the final analysis, a tragic loss of life can bring positive growth in the life of a school, just as personal loss can offer us, as individuals, the opportunity for growth. When students honestly grieve together, they tend to become more comfortable with the emotion of others. Tears become more acceptable, and some relaxation of the *macho* image is evident. In a school environment after a death, it is easier to say to students, "Do something nice for someone now. Life is uncertain." Students who have never experienced loss can't appreciate death's permanence. When a classmate dies, students understand forever that the loss of a friend is a final loss.

Finally, the loss of a classmate makes it possible to talk with students about their own immortality myths. It is this sense that "nothing can happen to me" that makes it so difficult to work with teenagers about risk issues such as substance abuse and sexual activity. When they know that teenagers do die, it makes it a little easier to reach some of them about possible causes of death.

The loss of a member of the community is a difficult thing for a school to handle. Such a loss touches those of us who are dedicated to educating young people with an infinite sense of our own inadequacy. We can't protect them from the dangers of the world toward which they are rushing and we can't protect them from the pain of loss when something tragic happens. What we can do is be there for them, provide them with a place to grieve and with the help that they need to move through the process, and show them that part of life is moving through the pain of loss. We can help them to understand that no matter how bleak things seem today, there can be a happy tomorrow.