



## Toolkit for School Personnel

This toolkit is for school personnel to use in the event of a death. It provides you with helpful tips and information to use throughout the response to a death in the school community. Please feel free to share these resources.

**Western Reserve Grief Services**, a program of Hospice of the Western Reserve is a community-based grief support program that provides services throughout Northern Ohio. We offer support to anyone who has experienced a loss due to death, regardless of ability to pay.

It is our hope that in utilizing this toolkit, educators of grieving children will know that they are not alone. Support is available through a variety of programs offered by the bereavement center. Please feel free to contact us at 216.486.6287 or visit the [www.hospicewr.org/griefandloss](http://www.hospicewr.org/griefandloss) for more information.

## Educator's Guide to the Grieving Student

### Do:

- Contact the family after the death
  - Offer support
  - Find out what classmates should be told
- Prepare class for student's return
  - Share info about death
  - Answer questions/concerns
  - Identify helpful/unhelpful things to say & do when the student returns
- Make a plan with the student:
  - Establish a safe place to be alone if student needs it
  - Identify a safe person the student may talk with
  - Modify academic expectations as needed
- Be available to listen
- Follow routines; they provide a sense of safety and comfort
- Set limits and address risk taking behavior

### Do Say:

- "I'm sorry that this happened."
- "I know you are sad/angry/in pain..."
- "This must be a hard time for you..."
- "I'm ready to listen if you feel like talking."
- "It can be hard to understand why these things happen."
- "Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable in class."
- "Expressing your tears and pain can help you through this hard time."

### Do not:

- Act as if nothing happened.
- Expect the student to finish all assignments on time.
- Ask how the student is doing unless you are sincere and prepared to hear the truth.
- Use religious concepts unless they are asked for, and if so, use them very carefully.
- Make statements about how people will or will not feel in the future.
- Assume that the student is coping well, even if he/she appears to be.
- Take a grieving student's anger personally.
- Allow your own emotions to get in the way of being helpful.

### Avoid Saying:

- "You will get over it."
- "You should be over this by now."
- "I know just how you feel."
- "You should/shouldn't feel like..."
- "Count your blessings..."
- "Things could be worse..."
- "Your loved one is better off."
- "Be strong for your mother, siblings, etc."
- "God has a reason for everything, even this."
- "This was God's will."

## When Death Impacts School---Crisis Response Tips

### *Information gathering*

- If possible, contact family to express condolences, gather information, and establish an outline of information to be shared with staff and students.
- Identify inner circle staff and students – (those most affected by the death: friends, classmates, teammates) - they will need special support.
- Identify at-risk students (severe personal or family illness, recent or significant death, psychological difficulties, etc.)

### *Information sharing*

- Create a plan for informing (preferably in this order): inner circle staff, all staff, inner circle students, all students. Utilize a group email/text on holidays, evenings and weekends so that staff are prepared when returning to school.
- It is best if a school staff member informs students of the death, in small groups no larger than a typical class size. A member of our crisis team can offer support to staff and students in this process, assisting with student reactions, questions, etc.
- Avoid discussing confidential, unconfirmed or highly charged facts of the death in the presence of students.
- Avoid large scale assemblies, especially in cases of murder and/or suicide.

### *Schedule*

- Determine schedule adjustments carefully. Important tests should be rescheduled if possible.
- Try not to cancel art, music, physical education, etc., as they provide good opportunities for the students to process their grief and express their emotions.
- Hold a staff meeting at the end of the day for staff to learn any new information, process the crisis interventions performed and provide feedback to our team.
- Discuss your needs for follow-up services with us as soon as possible. These include: in school grief support groups, staff support and education, parent programs and assistance with memorial activities.



## Template Letter

Dear Parents/Guardians:

It is with great sadness that I inform you of the death of one of our students. **Jane Doe**, a **second** grader at **XYZ School**, died in an accident... (Add limited information here, if appropriate.)

**Jane** was a \_\_\_\_\_ (**adjective, i.e. delightful, etc.**) **student/child** and will be dearly missed by all who knew her. Cards and notes of support may be sent to her family:

Jane Doe's family Street address

We will communicate about the funeral arrangements when information is made available (**or if already available, include funeral and viewing information**).

When we learned of **Jane's** death, we knew it was important to inform the students as soon as possible. The facts were written down for each teacher to read to the class. School Counselors (and Bereavement Counselors/Crisis Counselors) visited each **second-grade** class, offering the children time to talk and to share their feelings and concerns. Staff and students needing additional support had the opportunity to further meet with a counselor. In the next several days, counselors will continue to be available to staff and students as needed.

Over the next several weeks, we will assess the need for further support services to the students, including bereavement support groups. We will also be planning a school memorial in the future.

Your child may express grief symptoms in a variety of ways, some include:

- Tearfulness
- Clinging behavior
- Mood swings
- Fearfulness
- Regressive behaviors
- Sleep problems
- Scary dreams
- Irritability
- Physical complaints – stomachaches, headaches

Sincerely,

You may find the enclosed information helpful as you assist your grieving child. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact: (List contact information here).

## Coping with the Trauma of Sudden Death

The inconceivable happens - a special person dies in an unexpected and traumatic way. This may be a family member, a co-worker, a friend, or the neighbor down the street.

### Understanding the Trauma of Sudden Death

It is important to understand that a sudden death falls outside our usual experience, what we expect life to be like. Abruptly losing a special person can shatter our sense of well-being. We may experience very **strong reactions that could include fear, helplessness, shock, anger, and, sometimes, horror.** These reactions are **normal responses to an extremely difficult time** in our lives. These trauma reactions mix with our grief, and the results can be overwhelming.

### Traumatic Stresses

While we may feel like we are in “another world,” the world around us does not stop. Feelings of trauma and grief can be compounded with additional changes and losses. Sometimes our reactions appear immediately after a sudden traumatic death and at other times it may be a few hours, days, or even weeks before we experience stress reactions. It is common to feel **a sense of numbness, “being in a fog.”**

Traumatic stress can impact us physically and emotionally. We may experience a wide variety of feelings, such as ranging from guilt to fear and many others. We might be irritable, anxious, or feel overwhelmed or confused. Our eating or sleeping habits may change. We may not be able to recall the details of the death. Normal physical signals of stress may range from nausea, thirst, or fatigue to chest pain or headaches. Consult a medical professional if needed.

### Things that Help

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last from a few days to a few months, or longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic death. The understanding and support of loved ones can help the stress reactions pass more quickly. Some suggestions:

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible (as impossible as it seems); structure your time
- Follow the basics for good health: rest, eat well, exercise
- Reduce other stressors as much as possible: limit distractions that might interfere with concentration
- Be aware of *numbing* the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; go easy on caffeine
- Talk to people – reach out, spend time with others
- Do things that feel good: take a walk, listen to music, keep a feelings journal, etc.
- Give yourself permission to feel the pain and share these feelings with others
- Don't feel the need to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks; they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.

Remember you are not going crazy. Your reactions are normal. However, there are times when a traumatic death is so painful that professional assistance may be helpful. Seek professional help if anger, anxiety and depression persist, worsen or begin to interfere with your life, job or relationships.

## Trauma and Grief

Trauma reactions are **NORMAL** reactions that happen when a person experiences an **ABNORMAL** situation that is very overwhelming and threatening. When a person has been through a traumatic experience they also have a great deal of fear and/or helplessness.

Grief reactions are **NORMAL** reactions that happen when a person experiences a significant loss in their lives.

Listed below are common reactions that can be expected when someone has had either a trauma or a loss.

TRAUMA	GRIEF
Main feeling is terror or fear	Main feeling is sadness
Trauma includes feeling grief	Grief is not traumatic
The experience is hard to talk about	Can talk about the loss
Left with a sense of being helplessness and powerlessness	Left with sense of sorrow
May experience being angrier more quickly and acting this out towards others	May feel angry about the loss, but not so likely to act out with anger towards others
May feel guilt – like “I should have prevented it” or “it should have been me instead”	If feeling guilt, it is more about regrets of what you wished you could of or should have done or said with the person who died
Leaves one feeling bad about self	Does not feel badly about self, just sadness and missing of the other person
Dreams of being victimized	Dreams about the person who died
Can’t really forget – may have flashbacks or thoughts that keep coming back of the event	Remembers with sadness for loss, but not so much upsetting thoughts or memories of what has happened
Try to avoid anything that is a reminder of trauma - “numbing” (no feeling)	Want to remember the person who has died
Startle reactions, or hyper vigilance (keeping a look out for threats)	Mostly sadness, but not these other Reactions

These reactions should lessen over time.

However, if they do not, you may wish to seek help from a counselor.

# COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

## PHYSICAL



- Appetite – loss or increase
- Breathing difficulties
- Chest tightness
- Cold hands
- Crying
- Dizziness or fainting spells
- Dry mouth
- Headaches
- Hives, rashes, itching
- Indigestion
- Low resistance to illness and infection
- Muscle tightness
- Nightmares
- Numbness or tingling
- Rapid heart beat
- Shaking
- Sighing
- Sleeping difficulties - too much, too little
- Slowed speech
- Stuttering
- Stomach problems, butterflies
- Sweating
- Tearfulness
- Trembling
- Voice – change of pitch
- Weakness – especially in legs
- Weight gain or loss

## BEHAVIORAL



- Absent mindedness
- Accident proneness
- Clumsiness
- Eating difficulties
- Fingernail biting
- Hair twisting
- Nightmares
- Restlessness
- Searching and calling out
- Teeth grinding
- Treasuring objects of the deceased
- Visiting places of the deceased

## EMOTIONAL/SOCIAL



- Anger or angry outbursts
- Anxiousness
- Blaming others
- Critical of self
- Crying
- Depression
- Dread
- Fearful
- Freedom
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive behavior
- Indecisiveness
- Irritability
- Jealousy
- Loneliness
- Longing
- Loss of interest in living
- Low self-esteem
- Moodiness or mood swings
- Relief
- Restlessness
- Sadness
- Shock
- Suspiciousness
- Withdrawal from activity
- Worthlessness

## INTELLECTUAL/COGNITIVE



- Concentration difficulties
- Confusion
- Disbelief
- Errors in:
  - Judging distances
  - Grammar
  - Pronunciation
  - Use of numbers
- Fantasy life increased or decreased
- Forgetfulness
- Inattention
- Lack of awareness
- Loss of creativity
- Loss of productivity
- Over attention to details
- Perfectionism
- Preoccupation
- Sense of loved one's presence
- Worrying

## FLARE UPS OF:

- Allergies
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Canker sores
- Cold sores
- Migraines

This is only a partial listing of common grief reactions.  
There are many additional grief reactions that are not included here.

## Children's Development Stages and Reactions to Death

<i>Ages</i>	<i>Common Developmental Characteristics</i>	<i>Grief Reactions</i>	<i>Helpful Approaches</i>
<b>2 - 5 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Magical, fantastical thinking.</li> <li>▪ Active fantasy life</li> <li>▪ Highly egocentric</li> <li>▪ May blame self for bad things.</li> <li>▪ May not be able to verbalize needs and fears</li> <li>▪ Reversibility of concepts. Need to repeat things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Confusion. Agitation at night; may be afraid to go to sleep.</li> <li>▪ Child may be able to appreciate a profound event has occurred, but may not understand permanence of death.</li> <li>▪ May seem unaffected.</li> <li>▪ Repeated questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Simple honest words, and phrases.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance.</li> <li>▪ Secure and loving environment</li> <li>▪ Drawing, reading, books, playing together, active play.</li> <li>▪ Support play as form of expression.</li> <li>▪ Include in the funeral rituals</li> </ul>
<b>5 - 8 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Child can think concretely and logically.</li> <li>▪ Ability to use language increases.</li> <li>▪ Increased memory capacity, both long and short term.</li> <li>▪ Increased awareness of feelings and expectations of others.</li> <li>▪ Peers important.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Want to understand death in a concrete way.</li> <li>▪ Denial, anger, sorrow</li> <li>▪ Distress.</li> <li>▪ May act as though nothing has happened.</li> <li>▪ Desire to be like peers.</li> <li>▪ May repeat questions.</li> <li>▪ May need physical activity regularly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Answer questions simply and honestly.</li> <li>▪ Look for confused thinking.</li> <li>▪ Offer physical outlets.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance about the future.</li> <li>▪ Drawing, reading, playing together.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral rituals.</li> </ul>
<b>8 - 12 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Enjoy games, and competing.</li> <li>▪ Begin to have increased understanding of self and relationship to world.</li> <li>▪ Increased propensity for language.</li> <li>▪ Able to reason through situations using problem solving skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shock, denial, anxiety, distress.</li> <li>▪ Try to cope.</li> <li>▪ Understand finality of death.</li> <li>▪ May have morbid curiosity, or want to know specifics about death and dying.</li> <li>▪ May need regular physical activity.</li> <li>▪ Want to be like peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Answer questions directly and honestly.</li> <li>▪ Reassurance about the future.</li> <li>▪ Create times to talk about feelings and questions.</li> <li>▪ Offer physical outlets.</li> <li>▪ Reading.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral plans and rituals.</li> </ul>
<b>12 - 18 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Need independence.</li> <li>▪ Can think abstractly.</li> <li>▪ Puberty usually has begun by now.</li> <li>▪ May have false sense of immortality.</li> <li>▪ Peer group important.</li> <li>▪ May begin to have intimate relationships.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Shock, anger, distress.</li> <li>▪ May become depressed or withdraw.</li> <li>▪ May react similar to adult, but have less coping mechanisms.</li> <li>▪ May feel isolated, especially from peers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Allow and encourage expression of feelings.</li> <li>▪ Encourage peer support.</li> <li>▪ Groups may be helpful.</li> <li>▪ Utilize other adults.</li> <li>▪ Maintain consistent environment.</li> <li>▪ Include in funeral plans and rituals.</li> </ul>

\*Adapted from Dougy Center Handbook

## Planning School Memorials

### Things to consider

- What has school done in past when someone died?
- Contact family members of deceased to inform them of plans, ask for insights and invite them.
- Appoint a staff member or two to coordinate the memorial.
- Involve staff/students that have had a personal connection to the deceased.
- Think through the time frame for memorial, time of day (consider having towards end of day).

### Ideas to consider

- Social Media tribute
- Plan a memorial walk or gathering for the deceased person in the future.
- Plant a tree with a plaque in memory of the deceased.
- Design a t-shirt in honor of the deceased.
- Participate in Children's Grief Awareness Day (Thursday before Thanksgiving every year).



## Websites for Grief Resources

The following is a partial list of Websites that may be useful in working with children, teens, and families. There is no affiliation between Hospice of the Western Reserve and these websites, and HWR bears no responsibility for the information contained on them. Please view them at your own discretion.

[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

[www.childrengrieve.org/](http://www.childrengrieve.org/)

[www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/addressing-grief/](http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/addressing-grief/)

[www.kidsaid.com](http://www.kidsaid.com)

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

[www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

[www.schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org)