

Dealing with Death in School

Guidelines for High School Teachers

The death of a student will have a profound impact on the entire school community. Often teachers and school staff struggle with how best to help the grieving student population. With that in mind, the following are some tips for coping with the death of a student at school.

Acknowledge the intensity of the loss

The death of a classmate will affect the entire student body, even those who did not know the deceased. Therefore, it is important to provide a number of opportunities for the students to express feelings of grief and loss. Often this is a school wide decision; however an individual teacher may decide to address this in class. During this time of intense grief and sadness teachers and staff can model how to cope with death. Rituals provide a source of continuity. For example, letters or cards to family can give students comfort and the family support at the time of the loss. Prayer and religious ritual can provide comfort and faith in a time of uncertainty.

Do not erase the student's presence in the classroom

Often teachers question what to do with the student's desk. Sometimes it helps to ask the class for input with how to handle this. An appropriate decision may be to leave the desk for a certain length of time and then remove it.

Expect a range of reactions

Everyone responds to death differently. Some students may be visibly upset, while others may appear to have little or no reaction. Still others may act out, laugh or act inappropriately. Often Teens cognitively understand the meaning of death as adults do. However, they are only able to deal with it as an adolescent. Finally when a death is sudden and traumatic, often the focus will be on the nature of the event before the full impact of the grief is felt. It may take weeks or months before the sadness surfaces.

Remember that any death can reawaken feelings about a past loss

Both teens and adults who have experienced any death prior to this can feel the impact of that loss again. Sometimes feelings that surface may be about the past loss and not the recent death.

Remember that you will also have your own feelings about the death of the student

It is important to understand your own feelings and get support for yourself if necessary. Acknowledging your own feelings can increase your empathy for the students, as well as help to recognize your limits. While it is okay to express your feelings about the loss, it is not okay to judge students for their reactions. For example, it is not helpful to dismiss a student's anger if you feel sad, nor is it helpful to disregard feelings of sadness if you feel angry.

- Be open and listen when needed. It is not necessary to have any "answers"
- Avoid judgment around the circumstances of the death
- Understand some students may not have a need to talk about it
- Recognize that some students may need to return to a normal routine while others may need more time to grieve
- Monitor students' behavior and the intensity and duration of reactions
- Refer any students, when appropriate, to guidance for extra support
- Be prepared for reactions to surface prior to significant events such as prom and graduation