



Pathways Hospice
**How Counselors and Teachers
Tell Students About A Death**

Which Students Need to Be Told?

The ones directly affected by the crisis. —Do not under-estimate who these students may be; friends, rivals, and/or acquaintances. Information is a powerful tool for the integration of a crisis. We are not protecting children by withholding from them. Information does not “stir things up needlessly.” Children will discuss these critical events among themselves within their own underground lines of communication, on the playground, or by their lockers, often with incorrect information and embellishments. How much better to respect ourselves as adult role models on whom they can rely for the processing of the difficult events in their lives. What could be more representative of our roles as educators?

What Will They Be Told?

The truth.

The truth is the foundation of a child’s exploration of the unknown. Let us be true counselors/teachers by offering to a child true information on which to build their own understanding of meaning.

How Will They Be Told?

- As soon as possible (in the first period class)
- An informal setting is preferable; i.e., Sit in a circle on the rug or move the chairs or desks together in a circle in the classroom.
- Take time, allow for silence, questions and personal sharing.
- A child’s speculation about what has happened and his/her need for details is not morbid. It is a natural function of his/ her grieving process. Answer the questions when appropriate or reply, “I don’t know” when that is the truth. Questions may include: What are the details of the death? Where is the body now? What is cremation? What will happen to the family or the one who died?

See guidelines for teachers on *How to Lead a Discussion with Grieving Students* handout.



HOW STUDENTS MAY REACT FOLLOWING THE NEWS OF A DEATH

How Students May React

- Children may appear:
 - quiet - withdrawn
 - talkative - laughing
 - crying - curious
 - rowdy - belligerent
 - thoughtful - cooperative
 - cruel - numb/in shock
 - any combination of reactions is possible
- Accept a child's response with neutrality as long as the child is not hurting himself or others. Each is a valid and often sensible response for that particular child.

How Can You Detect An At-Risk Student?

- Students may be directly related to the crisis, i.e., the friends of someone who has died.
- Students may be unrelated to the present crisis but recovering from a recent tragedy in their own family or community.
- Students may be undergoing the stress of accumulated losses.

Regardless of the situation, all students may be potentially "at-risk." Observe them, listen to them, and ask others for help in finding the students that may need extra care and attention.

- At-Risk behavior may appear in any of 3 categories:
 1. Persistent withdrawal;
 2. Persistent acting out;
 3. Excessive obedience or achievement.

Whenever a child's behavior places that child or another in a dangerous situation, then the staff must find professional help for the child.

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A Script To Help Counselors And Teachers Announce A Death To Their Students

This is a hard task- to tell your students about a death that has occurred.

First and Foremost: If you do not feel that you want to be the one to tell your students, then don't. The crisis team will make available to you someone who can lead the discussion for you, or take over your class while you seek the support you need. Please take advantage of this resource! We care about your needs in this sad time and want you to feel our support.

If you do want to lead the discussion, then here are the facts and some suggestions for procedures:

"I have something very sad I want to share with you. Write here the factual information (agreed upon by the crisis team) e.g.;

Joe Smith, a student who attends our school, who was missing, is dead. Yesterday, the police found the little boy's body and he had been murdered. The police are investigating the crime and will give us information they can as they make progress in finding the killer.

I am feeling very sad about what's happened and a little scared, too. I would like to spend some time together now to share with each other. Maybe we could help each other in expressing how we feel about (name the one who died) and how she/he died."

- Take some time for discussion.
- Attached are handouts:
(Handouts could include: How Counselors And Teachers Tell Students About A Death, Counselor/ Teacher's Guidelines on How to Lead A Discussion with Grieving Students Handout; and Handouts about grieving children).
- After your discussion, tell the children that there are counselors in the building if they need to talk further and arrange with them a procedure for going to see the counselor or to a support room.
- After your discussion you may want to:
 1. Take a time of recess or playground play;
 2. Do some drawing, art project or other projects- leave the subject matter up to the student;
 3. Do some Journal Writing- write down thoughts about whatever is on the child's mind.
 4. Go back to curriculum.
- These activities may be useful to continue to do at intervals during the day and to intersperse throughout your curriculum in the coming days.

If you need some support, please call the office. Do not hesitate to ask.

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Counselor and Teacher Guidelines on How To Lead A Discussion With Grieving Students

- 1. A TEACHER CAN HAVE HELP**
A teacher must be comfortable enough with the issues being discussed in order to lead a discussion. If a teacher is not comfortable, then ask for help from the counselor/crisis team.
- 2. A CIRCLE**
Sit in a comfortable way. A circle is best to include all members in the discussion. Move the desks, sit on the rug, or in a comfortable location in the classroom.
- 3. "I PASS RULE"**
A child can pass the opportunity to share their feelings or thoughts at any time. In this way, we can express to the child that we trust him/her to know when he/she is ready to share grief.
- 4. "TALKING STICK"**
Use a special object as your "Talking Stick." It can be a stuffed animal, a special rock, or a traditional Native American Talking Stick with feathers tied to it. The one holding the "Talking Stick" is the only one to speak at a time.
- 5. ANSWER QUESTIONS TRUTHFULLY AND IF YOU DO NOT KNOW, SAY SO. OFFER TO FIND OUT ANSWERS AND REPORT BACK IF POSSIBLE.**
- 6. AVOID ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS.**
When in discussion groups, remember that too many questions can often be overwhelming. Listen carefully when a child shares an experience and be willing to simply reflect their statements. This often gives the children a sense of what they are feeling and inspires them to proceed at their own pace.
- 7. AVOID INTERPRETATIONS**
If a child is indirect or is using symbols in order to express him/herself, it is because direct communication is too painful. Communicate with a child through the information and the symbols that are offered.
- 8. AVOID JUDGEMENT**
Referring to a child's sharing as either "good" or "bad" can encourage a child to seek adult approval while discouraging the child to trust his/her own way of expressing grief. You can say "thank you" for their sharing.
- 9. ALLOW FOR SILENCE AND TEARS**
- 10. ALLOW FOR LAUGHTER AND JOKING**
Good memories of the person who dies may also arise.
- 11. SHARE YOUR OWN FEELINGS**
You can model grief for students by sharing your own feelings, but seek your support from other adults.
- 12. ENCOURAGE OTHER SUPPORT**
After a sharing time, it is important to close with appreciation for what has been shared and a discussion about who the child can talk to when they need support. Offer going to a support room, if available, during the school day.
- 13. BEARS OR PLAY-DOH**
It helps younger students to talk about difficult issues if they can hold a stuffed animal or manipulate some play-doh.
- 14. WARN OF POSSIBLE FEELINGS**
Inform students that they may experience wide ranges of feelings (anger, sadness, laughter) from one moment to the next. That is okay, and is normal.
- 15. ALLOW FOR CURIOSITY**
The discussion may include curiosity about what occurred, especially for older students. They may wish to share memories of the person who died, regrets (assure them they did their best), and wishes to memorialize the person. Assist them in developing ways they can personally and collectively memorialize the person who died.



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What To Say To Grieving Students

Counselors/Teachers.....

"I'm sorry that your mother died."

"I'm available at lunch-time (be specific) if you want to talk or shoot some baskets."

"Let's talk about what would make you feel more comfortable in class." Some ideas might be: homework issues; being able to leave class when needed; having a journal or drawing paper for times the student can't concentrate

"I care about you."

"I am aware that today is your birthday/ your mother's birthday/ Mother's Day/ the anniversary of the day your mother died. I'm thinking about you."

"When is your basketball game? Maybe I can stop by and watch you play."

Students or School Personnel

"I can't know how you feel, but I want to."

"I can't know how you feel, but I did have my Grandfather die...(share)."

"If you want to talk, I want to listen. If you don't want to talk, I'll hang out with you."

"If you don't want to talk to other students, I'll tell them about our mother."

"I'd like to do something with you on Saturday. We can sit and talk about your Mom if you'd like, or we can go roller-skating at the mall- both is O.K."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Show me her pictures."

(Don't forget to continue to joke and crack-up. Laughter is food to help us endure.)

Things Teachers/Counselors Can Say or Do to Help a Student Coming Back to School After a Death

"I remember when I went back to school how terrified I was. My heart began to beat faster as I reached for the doorknob." - 12 year-old

1. Talk to the student about what she/he may want the class to know about the death and who should tell them. Ideal to know this before the student returns to school.
2. Make a plan with the student so she/he may leave the room if she/he is upset.
3. Find a safe place that the student can go during the school day, at recess, at lunch or during class if she/he wants some time alone.
4. Find a safe place that the student can go during the day if she/he wishes to talk with a counselor, principal or nurse.
5. Encourage the student to answer questions only when she/he feels like it. If the student does not want to answer, suggest that they say, "I'd rather not talk about that right now."
6. Offer the student a journal as a gift. Encourage the student to write about feelings, thoughts and/or memories in the journal during the school day when needed, especially during times the student is not able to concentrate on school work. Offer crayons and a blank drawing book to a younger child.
7. Negotiate, on an ongoing basis, homework and classroom assignment expectations. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy. It will take time for the student to return to previous standards of performance.
8. Offer yourself as a listener or friend to the student if you want to do so. Designate times when you are available; i.e., lunch, recess, after school.



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Special Considerations
In The Event Of A Death By Suicide

A SUICIDAL DEATH IS A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT ONE IN THAT IT ASKS SCHOOL PERSONNEL TO MEET TWO CRISES IN ONE:

- The death and the subsequent bereavement caused by the death.
- The suicide and subsequent suicidal prevention and intervention that may be needed among the survivors.

EXTRA TRAINING IS NEEDED TO BE PREPARED

- School personnel must be properly trained in how to detect and respond to a potentially suicidal situation and how to seek help. A suicide death may engender notes, remarks and behavior on the part of the surviving students that would indicate suicidal ideation and gesture.
- Professionals in suicide prevention should be called on to address these issues with the school personnel. Have a list of resources posted and available, including the crisis hotline number.
- Although law suits against school and personnel are rare, liability usually centers on the issue of negligence, i.e., did they do what was reasonable to prevent the suicide? Having a school plan and providing training for staff should help reduce the chances of being the target of negligence in a lawsuit.
- Suicide may have a certain philosophical or religious significance to some staff. If a staff member does not feel willing or able to address the issues of suicide with neutrality, he or she should not be asked to process the experience with the students.

TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS IS THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN DIFFUSING THE THREAT OF SUICIDE

- A suicidal death asks that we commit the time it takes to talk and talk until the talking needed with the students at-risk is done.
- Support people should be available to every student who asks and every student who is mentioned to be at-risk by staff or other students. A preliminary assessment and referrals to professional counseling must be made.

DEALING WITH PARENTS

- Inform all parents of students impacted by the suicide by letter.
- Call parents who have had a suicidal situation in their family in the past as members in this family may be re-stimulated by the recent suicide.
- Call parents of any at-risk students and make referrals to counseling. If you have a student at risk and parents are not following through with referrals, call Child Protective Services.

THE MEMORIAL

- **It is essential to address and mourn a suicide death of a student or staff member as you would a death from any cause.** We must represent our respect and reverence for the life that is lost to our children/students no matter what the means of death.
- However, caution should be exercised in public memorials and commemoration of a student/ staff member who has committed suicide. If done correctly, the mourning of someone who has committed suicide would not inspire other despairing students to discuss depression and suicidal thoughts in order to seek help (small group meetings of friends and teachers, rather than a school assembly; a picture of the deceased among the class photos in the yearbook, but not a dedication of the yearbook).



COMMEMORATION REQUIRES A COMMITMENT OF TIME.

In such a memorial, we celebrate the life of the one who dies and, at the same time, we educate about suicide and suicide prevention.

POSSIBLE SCRIPT:

"We remember _____ and her gifts. She brought us many things... Yet we are sad and disappointed that she chose to kill herself. We can never know exactly why she committed suicide. I am sure many of us wonder if we could have prevented it. What I know is that we probably did the best we could. In some ways, she couldn't remember that we cared.

We do care. For those of you who feel like giving up, I want you to know that we, as your teachers and counselors, are people who are concerned and care about you. It is important to talk about how you are feeling. Find someone to talk to if you are having suicidal thoughts. Come to your teachers and counselors. There are people who know how to help. Counselors will be available...(when and where)."

ONGOING CARE IS NEEDED.

- Increased suicidal behavior sometimes occurs for years after a suicide.
- The anniversary of a suicide can be a time of increased suicidal behavior.

ESTIMATION OF SUICIDAL POTENTIAL

1. Is the child thinking about suicide?
2. How long has the child had these thoughts and feelings?
3. How frequently does (s)he have these thoughts?
4. How long do these thoughts last?
5. How dangerous is the method?
6. Availability of the method.
7. How likely is the possibility of rescue?

OTHER FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED:

1. Degree of hopelessness.
2. Degree of helplessness.
3. Mood state – how sad.
4. How anxious, irritable, panicky – may be losing control.
5. How much sleep disturbance?
6. History of family suicides.
7. What instances of recent loss?
8. Any indications of putting one's house in order?
9. Support systems available?



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Aspects Of Grief After A Violent Death

Persons Who Experience A Homicide or Other Violent Death Tend To:

- Experience the impact of a sudden, unexpected, violent death with the possibility of a mutilated body, or no body at all.
- Feel insecure, fearful, and have concerns for their safety.
- Question their own basic beliefs and values about the importance of human life and behaviors.
- Experience tremendous family stress as each person is grieving differently and each needs additional support.
- Have a great deal of guilt over not having protected their loved one.
- Feel the stigma of having a family member murdered, with people believing that only criminal types are murdered.
- Experience changes in their support system because people don't know what to say and tend to stay away.
- Be ignored, mistreated and receive little information from law enforcement officials assigned to the case.
- Postpone their grief until after the trial and sentencing.
- Find that whatever the sentence the murder receives, it is not enough to compensate for their loss.
- Become victimized as a result of media coverage, for months and sometimes years after the death.
- Experience intense anger, rage and sometimes revenge, which is overwhelming and produces within them fear of their own response.

Concerns For Children Who Are Affected By A Violent Death

Fear of the Death:

- Their own death
- Death of those who protect them, such as a parent
- Death of friends and loved ones

Anxiety About:

- Being left alone
- Sleeping alone
- Leaving the surviving family members

Regression:

- Need for more holding, hugs and nurturance
- Clingy, irritable behavior
- Possible bedwetting

Sleep Disorder:

- Fear of going to bed
- Not able to get to sleep or waking throughout the night
- Nightmares

Somatic Complaints:

- Stomachaches, headaches, heartaches

Eating Habit Changes

Reliving The Violent Experience In Play Or In Memory.

Change In School Behavior And Reduced Ability To Concentrate.

Affect Change:

- Risk taking and more aggressive
- Hopeless, depressed, inhibited

Desire Not To Stand Out Or Be Different



Complications For Persons Who Experience A Violent Death

Psychological Trauma

- Suddenness of the Death
- Inability to Say Goodbye
- Intentional Destructive Nature of the Act
- Willful Disrespect for Life

Last Memory Of Person May Be Mutilated, Bloody Body.

Fear For Own Or Caretaker's Safety.

Conflict Of Values

- Value or Worth of Human Life
- Shattered View of World Being Safe
- Won't Happen to Me

Feelings Of Powerlessness, Guilt, Anger, And/Or Revenge.

Difficulty In Understanding And Accepting "Why" Because Of The Violent Nature Of The Death.

True Story Not Always Known Or Shared Honestly In Order To "Protect" The Love One.

Community Reaction

- Stigma or Criminal Element Associated with Murder
- "Blame The Victim" Attitude
- Isolation of Family, Withdrawal of Support

Media Attention, Sensationalizing, Revictimizing

- Families can hear the information for the first time on the news.
- Media does not respect the privacy and grief of family.
- Story retold over and over for several months or even years after the death

Law Enforcement

- Criminal Sometimes Not Found
- Lengthy Investigation
- Family not adequately informed of progress or lack of It
- Persons not allowed to talk about Their Situation during Investigation

Criminal and Judicial System

- Proceedings Often Postponed/ Delayed for Months or Years
- Families Required to Tell and Retell the Painful Story
- Accused Person Often Plea Bargains, Getting a Lighter Sentence
- Sentence Never Enough to Justify the Death of the Loved One

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