

Toolkit for School Personnel

The Crisis Toolkit is a guide for school administrators, faculty and staff to use in the event of a death. The toolkit provides administrators with helpful tips in supporting teachers, students and community members in a crisis situation. Educators are given the tools to communicate and assess the grieving student while developing a plan to notify families, create a safe and secure school environment for students, plan memorials and provide continued support for students post crisis.

Western Reserve Grief Services 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.

In this toolkit, you will find support for the following:

- **Supportive Guides**
 - The Educator's Guide to the Grieving Student
 - When Death Impacts School: Crisis Response Tips
 - Template letter to families
 - Coping with the Trauma of Sudden Death (with High School students)
 - Facing Teen Suicide
 - Planning School Memorials
 - Common Grief Reactions
 - Grieving child's resource list

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 [bereavement center's website](#) for more information.

Sincerely,



Jane Arnoff Logsdon, MSSA, LSW
School Liaison

Educator's Guide to the Grieving Student

Do:

- Contact the family after the death
 - Find out what classmates should be told
 - Offer support
- 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."
- "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 are 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."
- "You'll be stronger for this."
- "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 phone tree 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: group counseling, staff support and education, parent programs and memorial activities.

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... The cause can be murder, suicide, car accident, natural or manmade disasters.

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 our bodies, our thinking, our emotions and our behavior. We may experience a wide variety of feelings, such as guilt, fear, denial, anger, grief, or depression. 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, headaches, or tremors. Because any of these physical symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation, it is important to consult a physician.

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 family and friends can help the stress reactions pass more quickly. There are a number of things that can help during this very difficult time.

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible (as impossible as it seems); structure your time
- Follow the basics for good health (even when you don't feel like it) – rest, eat well, exercise
- Reduce other stressors as much as possible - make to do lists, be patient with yourself when you can't find your keys, 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 to you – 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.

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.

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 more angry 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, it is wise to seek help from a counselor.

Planning School Memorials

Things to consider:

- *What has school done in past when someone died?*
- *Contact family members of deceased to gain insight (favorite music, songs, poems, etc.; inform of the memorial and invite to attend)*
- *Allow enough time for staff and students to prepare*
- *Appoint a staff member to coordinate*
- *Involve staff that have had a personal connection to the deceased*
- *Invite students to contribute in a meaningful way, if possible on two levels- student body and inner circle students.*
- *Time frame for memorial*
 - *Length of time*
 - *Permanent or temporary?*

Possible roles for staff and/or students:

- *Memorial planning committee, help select music, readings, readers, etc.*
- *Write poems or short testimonial statements about deceased, i.e., what made him/her special? how he/she made an impact on our school, what's something you learned from the deceased?*
- *Planning committee can review the testimonials and read some at the memorial service*
- *Social Media tribute*

Template Letter

Dear Parents:

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**, was killed suddenly by a car today on her way to school. (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 at:

Jane Doe's family
Street address

We will send home information about the funeral arrangements when it is available; **or** please watch the newspaper for funeral information; (**or if 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. In order to avoid rumors, 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 near future.

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

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

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).

Sincerely,



Websites for Grief Resources

The following is a partial list of Websites that may be useful in working with children, teens, and families. These web sites contain grief support, articles, and resources. 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.aarp.org/griefandloss/ is an extensive site with multiple links to topics of grief and loss.

www.americanhospice.org this foundation offers professional training programs and public education materials that address the needs of terminally ill and grieving individuals of all ages. Training manuals, community education publications, and free articles on how to help grieving children are available on-line.

www.apa.org a website managed by the American Psychological Association offering current news releases concerning children and families and links to articles from *Monitor on Psychology*. Also has links to a range of other topics, such as PTSD, trauma, and emotional health.

www.beliefnet.com monthly articles covering a variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds for grieving teens, and for parents to read to younger children. Can also post questions.

www.bereavedparentsusa.org is a self-help support group for parents and families who are struggling with the death of a child, grandchild, or sibling, (708) 748-7866.

www.bobbysbooks.org program that utilizes literature to help kids deal with difficult issues including grief.

www.centerforloss.com offers resources for the bereaved, their caregivers, and bereavement professionals. Also includes good articles by Dr. Alan Wolfelt.

www.dougy.org the Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families, located in Portland, Oregon, offers grief support and resources for children, teens, students, and families.

www.fernside.org is a nondenominational center in Cincinnati, Ohio for grieving children and their families, 4380 Malsbary Rd., Ste. 300, Cincinnati, OH, 45242, (513) 745-0111.

www.griefnet.org offers on-line grief support to help work through loss and grief issues of all kinds. Offers www.kidsaid.com, a website directed by a clinical psychologist, where youngsters can share and help each other deal with grief about any type of loss.

www.griefsong.com offers musical resources through Paul Alexander, including opportunities to create a personal memorial song.

Websites for Grief Resources Continued

www.growthhouse.org offers resources for life-threatening illness and end-of-life care. It has links to many bereavement sites, including those specializing in diversity.

www.hospicewr.org gives information about Hospice of the Western Reserve and The Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center services. Current issue of *About Grief* newsletter, and support group offerings throughout Cuyahoga, Lake, Ashtabula, Geauga, And Lorain counties.

www.journeyofhearts.org is an “on-line healing place for anyone grieving a loss.”

www.ncccv.org/violence/index.html the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence provides resources for children who have experienced violence, including children in the schools.

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/index.asp> the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, offers support on managing grief after a disaster, offering educational resources concerning PTSD and other enduring consequences of traumatic stress.

www.nctsn.org the National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides access to services for traumatized children, their families, and the community. Also has current research and information for parents and professionals on childhood trauma, including child traumatic grief.

<http://www.psychiatry.org/mental-illness> the American Psychiatric Association provides numerous links to mental health institutions and organizations.

www.suicidology.org is an educational and resource organization dedicated to the understanding and prevention of suicide.

www.webhealing.com by Tom Golden, LCSW, good general information about crisis, grief, and healing, with additional information on men and grief.

www.widownet.org is an information and self-help resource for and by widows and widowers; covers grief, bereavement and recover.

A Sampling of Web Sites Concerning End-Of-Life Issues

American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine

www.aahpm.org

American Art Therapy Association

www.arttherapy.org

American Hospice Foundation

www.americanhospice.org

Association for Death Education and Counseling

www.adec.org

Children's Hospice International

www.chionline.org

Cultural Guides to Dying, Death & the Afterlife

www.indranet.com/bardo/cultural.html

Growth House

www.growthhouse.org

Hospice Foundation of America

www.hospicefoundation.org

Hospice of the Western Reserve

www.hospicewr.org

Last Acts

www.lastacts.org

National Hospice Foundation

www.hospiceinfo.org

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

www.nhpco.org

National Public Radio

www.npr.org/programs/death/

Ohio Hospice & Palliative Care Organization

www.ohpco.org