



Partners in *grief*

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS AN UNPRECEDENTED TIME IN OUR COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY.

Our way of life has been completely uprooted. As we try to find our way to a “new normal,” it is important to understand how the pandemic is affecting children and adolescents, specifically the losses that students are experiencing. Many associate grief with the death of a loved one, but we can also grieve any significant non-death loss. I would like to take this time to discuss losses that students are grieving and how we can best help them adapt and cope.

One major loss that students are experiencing is their *sense of normalcy*. For five days a week, students were used to following a set school schedule including waking up at the same time, going to class in the same room, seeing the same teachers and friends, taking the same walk or ride home and going to bed at the same time. Educators know having this routine is imperative to a student’s success. Keeping a regular schedule provides a sense of control, predictability, calm and wellbeing.

WHAT CAN HELP: Establish a new educational routine that best suits your school's needs. It is important to keep students focused and on track. Discuss the need for students to have a daily schedule with parents and guardians. This includes a morning and bedtime routine, time for homework, breaks and exercise.

BY LINDSEY NEAG, MSSA, LSW, LSSW

Students are experiencing the loss of their *social lives* and their ability to see friends and other family members. Some introverted students may enjoy a break from being surrounded by others, however, for more extroverted students who thrive on frequent social interaction, this might begin to weigh on their mental health. You may notice signs of depression as their social norms are disrupted.

WHAT CAN HELP: Encourage all students to spend time outside or engaged in meaningful activity, like baking, playing board games and making crafts. When possible, use technology to connect with friends and family.



Some students may be *unable to see a dying loved one*, whether from COVID-19 or other causes. Due to federal and state social distancing requirements, many hospitals, long-term nursing homes and hospice facilities have limited the number of visitors. Families are forced to make the difficult decision of who can see their dying loved one.

WHAT CAN HELP: Acknowledge how painful and unfair that feels, and encourage students to engage in activities at home to help them feel connected to their person before he or she dies. This could include sharing stories, eating the person's favorite foods and connecting virtually with them through calls, video or social media.

Students have also lost their *sense of safety*. Students may have questions like: *Will I get COVID-19? • Will my family get it? • If Mom or Dad go outside, will they catch it? • Will life ever be normal again? Will I see my friends again? • Is it my fault?* All these questions and more may be bouncing through students' heads each day on top of other life stressors.

WHAT CAN HELP: As educators, you play a critical role in translating COVID-19 information for students. Here are some tips to utilize when answering these questions and talking to your students:

- Provide reassurance such as, "The risk of serious illness is low for children when infected."
- Explain and demonstrate ways to decrease risk. Wash your hands and maintain physical distance.
- Use age-appropriate language that is direct and easy to understand.
- Avoid fear-based approaches such as, "If you don't wash your hands, you will get sick."
- Answer questions honestly and accurately without unnecessary detail.
- Address and correct misinformation and misunderstandings students may have.
- Listen to their concerns.

While these four losses only touch on what students may be grieving during this difficult time, I hope it will provide a deeper understanding of what they are experiencing and the support you may be able to offer.

If you are interested in more information on how to work with students during the COVID-19 pandemic, please contact Lindsey Neag at 216.210.1523 or by email at lnearg@hospicewr.org.



**WESTERN
RESERVE
GRIEF SERVICES**

300 East 185th Street | Cleveland, OH 44119-1330

📞 800.707.8922 | 🌐 hospicewr.org

Serving the Northern Ohio counties of Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage, Stark and Summit.

School Resources

Western Reserve Grief Services gratefully acknowledges the Ridgecliff Foundation for their support of our school program.

AS A COMMUNITY PARTNER, Western Reserve Grief Services offers schools, faculty and staff members resources to navigate the painful experience of grief and loss.

Grief Support in Schools

School-based grief support programs are available for students and staff before or after the death of a student, staff or community member. This may include administrative consultation, staff support, facilitation of a 6-8 week support group (S.T.A.R.S.) for students in grades 1-12, or a Forget-Me-Not day retreat.

Classroom Presentations

Interactive classroom presentations, often integrated into a health class curriculum, can be provided to all grade levels with age-appropriate information focusing on natural life spans of all living things, end of life, anticipating a death, common grief reactions, coping, traumatic death and supporting a grieving friend.

Crisis Response

Immediate on-site crisis response is available when a school-related death occurs. All staff are trained and prepared to respond. This service is available to the general school community and provides grief counselors to support school administration, staff, parents and students. This includes strategic planning, large and small group interventions, education and follow-up support.

Staff Training

Professional development opportunities can be tailored to a school's specific needs. Topics include an overview of grief and loss, anticipatory grief, children and teen grief, traumatic grief, supporting students through loss, grief activities for the classroom and school crisis response.

*For more information or to set up a S.T.A.R.S. group, Forget-Me-Not day retreat, classroom presentation, staff training or to access crisis response, please contact **Lindsey Neag** at lnearg@hospicewr.org or **216.210.1523**.*