

## Grief and Loss

Schools must be prepared to respond to those experiencing grief and loss. Students and staff die. There are deaths in the family. Pets die. Parents divorce. Friends move away. And on and on.

Many useful “what to do” resources are available. Ideas culled from various sources are offered below. More help on this topic can be found by using the Quick Find search on our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

### Stages of Grieving

Grieving disrupts normal functioning, but it need not be a long lasting problem. “Working” through grief can help restore emotional health. Although grief stages may not occur in order, they are described as follows:

- *Shock* – usually the first reaction – often experienced as numbness or physical pain and withdrawal.
- *Denial* – acting as if no loss has occurred
- *Depression* – feeling pain, despair, emptiness – may not be accompanied by an emotional release such as crying
- *Guilt* – self-blame for not having expressed more caring or belief the loss was his/her fault
- *Anxiety* – panic reactions as reality sets in
- *Aggression* – toward those who might have prevented the loss and sometimes toward the lost object (may have trouble acknowledging anger toward the object of loss, but expressing such anger is seen as helping recovery)
- *Reintegration* – loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).

### Helping Students/Staff Deal with Loss

One of the most difficult losses is the death of someone who was loved. As in all loss situations, those grieving need to experience school as a safe place to think about and express their loss. To this end, anyone doing counseling needs to:

- (1) Recognize loss; encourage students/staff to talk about what happened and how they feel. (“Tell me what happened.” “I’m so sorry.”)

- (2) Tell others as a group what happened and respond emotionally. Directly relate the facts. Let them know how you feel. (“It hurts to know your mother died.”)
- (3) Allow students/staff to express their reactions and then validate the emotions that emerge at each grief stage. Offer time for them to share feelings and facilitate the process with warmth and understanding. For groups, validate the feelings expressed – even if they seem harsh. (There will be expressions of anger, fear, guilt, and so forth. Some will even indicate relief that what happened to someone else didn’t happen to them. Others may find it hard to express anything.) All need to be told it is O.K. to cry.
- (4) Answer questions directly and sensitively. Relate the facts of an event as best you can. In discussing death, recognize its finality – don’t compare it with sleeping (that can lead to sleep problems).
- (5) In a situation where someone returns to school after experiencing a cherished other’s death, be sure that students and staff are prepared for what to say and how to act. It is critical that they welcome the person and not shy away (“Glad you’re back, sorry about your brother.” “When you feel like it, let’s talk about it.”).
- (6) Don’t forget to take care of yourself – especially if the loss is one for you too.

### Helping the Bereaved Return to School

Individuals experiencing loss sometimes don’t want to return to school. There are many reasons for this. Crisis response plans should address what to do to maximize someone’s return after a loss.

*Outreach.* A home visit can help assess needs and how to address them. A step-by-step plan can be made with the individual’s family.

*Special support and accommodations at school.* Inform teachers and other staff about plans and specific ways to help a student or colleague readjust. Connect the person to special friends and counselors who will be especially supportive. Ensure that everyone understands grief reactions and is ready to be appropriately responsive. Add support around classroom learning activities and job functions to help if someone is having trouble focusing.

*Counseling to help the person through the stages of grief.* In general, the individual needs to have prompt and accurate information about what happened, honest answers to questions, an opportunity to work through the grief, and lots of good support.