

Addressing Grief through Death Education

Talking about death isn't easy, but it is important to help students navigate their way through grief. Teachers can play a valuable role in the process by being present, talking with students, and reminding them of available resources if they are hurting. Kailen Stover

Youngsters' are regularly exposed to death (e.g., of a relative, friend, pet, through the media). It is estimated that 5.6 million children in the U.S. will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of 18. An estimated 7.5 million children across the world lost a primary caregiver between January 1, 2020 and May 1, 2022 due to COVID-19. The figure jumps to 10.5 million when those who lost a secondary caregiver are included. For schools, this raises concerns about a growing prevalence of grief among students and staff and what to do about death education.

Probably because death is a rather taboo/uncomfortable subject to discuss, providing death education and attending to grief are not well addressed in most schools. As King-McKenzie (2011) notes:

Over the last few decades death has frequently walked the corridors of our schools either through murders, suicide or natural causes as stated above. It has bombarded the nation in ways that were not expected. Though we are never happy when death visits, we cannot deny its imminence and that it is essential to address the topic in schools so that students and teachers may be better able to cope when it comes visiting especially on our school campuses. Society tends to treat death as a distant cousin, a stepchild, and the proverbial mother-in-law or as even an enemy. For many people death is a difficult topic to discuss. People are scared to talk about death and dying especially with our students as they are afraid of what parents will say since it is not listed as a topic to be taught in the curriculum guidelines.

This Information Resource provides a stimulus for schools to discuss these matters.

What is Death Education?

As defined in the [Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying](#)

The term death education refers to a variety of educational activities and experiences related to death and embraces such core topics as meanings and attitudes toward death, processes of dying and bereavement, and care for people affected by death. Death education, also called education about death, dying, and bereavement, is based on the belief that death-denying, death-defying, and death-avoiding attitudes and practices in American culture can be transformed, and assumes that individuals and institutions will be better able to deal with death-related practices as a result of educational efforts. ... The overarching aims of death education are to promote the quality of life and living for oneself and others, and to assist in creating and maintaining the conditions to bring this about. This is accomplished through new or expanded knowledge and changes in attitudes and behavior. ... Two distinct methodological approaches to structured death education are the didactic and the experiential. The didactic approach (involving, for example, lectures and audiovisual presentations) is meant to improve knowledge. The experiential approach is used to actively involve participants by evoking feelings and thereby permitting death-related attitudes to be modified. This approach includes personal sharing of experiences in group discussion, role-playing, and a variety of other simulation exercises, and requires an atmosphere of mutual trust. Most educators use a combination of the two approaches.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Sydney Wiederkehr as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2023.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Writing for *Edutopia* in 2020,, Kailen Stover provides a teacher’s perspective on *Teaching Students About Death and Grief*.

... In my Death, Dying, and Grief unit, we examine the reactions and behaviors around death. We also practice coping mechanisms and discuss ways to support grieving friends and family.

Building Students Up. In order to prepare for these difficult topics, I spend a lot of time building a classroom culture of respect, compassion, and dignity. Every few weeks, we do class bonding activities that fit within our curriculum. ... These ... precede our more difficult conversations about death and dying. ...

I also introduce presentations early in the year. Students speak to their classmates on less intimidating topics first. By the time we reach conversations about grief, we have established a supportive community where students are comfortable sharing personal stories.

Understanding Grief. I begin my unit with a conversation about the stages of grief. We talk about how even though these are emotions and feelings, they can manifest physically as exhaustion, headache, or numbness in hands or feet.

We also look at tasks for grieving to help us understand that grieving is hard work and something that requires active participation. We make loss timelines, from birth to today, listing all the events that have prompted a grief cycle and identifying the emotions experienced during each of our own losses. Some students have many large losses, while others struggle to think of any. Students learn how any loss, not just a death, can cause grief. I start with an example not related to death: losing your cell phone. We walk through the stages, using this example: bargaining while trying to track it down, anger at ourselves or others, and finally acceptance that it is gone. Students learn how grief can take different forms and affect people differently.

Normalizing Reactions and Behaviors. Once we understand the stages and tasks of grieving, students learn to accept that everyone grieves in their own way. The stages are not linear, and tasks are not numbered. There is no right or wrong. There is no set path that everyone must follow; the stages and tasks will come and go, ebb and flow, throughout the rest of our lives.

Students learn how their emotional experience can be observed without being judged. We watch *Tuesdays With Morrie* and collect meaningful quotes that we turn into found poetry about death, life, and love.

Students also complete a hospice empathy activity to help identify emotions and learn how to support [others]. The discussion focuses on empathy and how it is distinct from sympathy.

Building Empathetic Responses. Using Silk and Goldman’s Kvetching Circle as a guide, students explore when to extend a listening ear and when to expose their own pain. Class discussions center on ways to help a friend who is hurting, and students develop an appreciation for presence: just sitting with a bereaved friend can mean so much.

Students share what has helped them the most during grief and how to extend that to others. They also learn the signs of a more serious response and discuss ways to ask for help for themselves or their loved ones.

Going Beyond the Classroom. Visiting a funeral home is our culminating activity for the unit. Students learn about the process of funeral planning because one day they will be the ones who need to plan someone’s funeral. As difficult and heartbreaking as that may be, they will handle the whole situation better if they are not walking into a funeral home for the first time ever in the throes of grief.

To prepare, I walk students through our agenda for the day. We start in the funeral home’s chapel, a nondenominational space where anyone can gather, with a presentation from the funeral director, who speaks about his or her role and what qualifications it requires. We move on to steps in planning, options available, and costs associated. The funeral director describes how the funeral home serves families and people of different cultures and religions. Students ask questions and tour the facility, which includes a stop in the sample room and reception room. We do not view any bodies, as that would not be respectful to the deceased or their families. At the very end, the students complete a written reflection about what they learned and how they felt. While they are completing the reflection, the on-site grief support dog visits with them.

My students are shocked by the cost and intricacy of planning and funerals. Students return with a greater understanding of themselves as well as their feelings and beliefs around death.

A Few Research Studies

According to the work of Corr & Corr (2013), the four central dimensions of death education include cognitive, affective, behavioral, and valuational dimensions. The cognitive dimension involves factual information surrounding death-related experiences. The affective dimension involves “feelings, emotions, and attitudes about death, dying, and bereavement.” The behavioral dimension focuses on matters such as why people act the way they do when confronted with death and loss. Valuational is meant to “identify, articulate, and affirm the basic values that govern human lives”

In general, research on the efficacy of death education programs suggests the following benefits:

- Increase in factual knowledge about death and mourning
- Reduced fear of death
- Conceptualization of death in biological terms
- Reduced existential concerns, such as the unfairness of death
- Increased language to discuss death, grief, and the emotions associated with each
- Increased ability to understand one's own grief reactions
- Increased ability to recognize the conflicting emotions that accompany grief
- Increased coping abilities
- Greater understanding of other religions and cultures, specifically in regards to their views on death

Below are abstracts from a few studies:

>**The Impact of School-Based Education on the Young Child's Understanding of Death.**

The young child's immature understanding of the concepts related to death serves to heighten anxiety about death and interferes with successful adjustment to loss. This study was a randomized trial of the efficacy of a 3-week school-based educational program in the promotion of the concepts of death in 4-to 8-year-old children (prekindergarten through second grade). ... The experimental group received three interventions: (1) a series of six 30 to 45-minute presentations about concepts of death, (2) teacher educational presentation, and (3) parent educational presentation. Significant mean gains were noted for the experimental group. ... equivalent to the amount of conceptual development that is seen in one year in the absence of intervention.

>***Dealing with the concepts of "grief" and "grieving" in the classroom: Children's perceptions, emotions, and behavior.***

This article presents an action research study that explores how a fifth-grade classroom of 10- to 11-year-old children in Cyprus perceive the concepts of grief and grieving, after an educational intervention provided space for discussing such issues. It also explores the impact that the intervention program had on children's emotions while exploring these concepts and illustrates how it affected their behavior. The findings suggest that the intervention had a constructive impact on children's understandings of grief and grieving along two important dimensions. First, the intervention helped children better define emotional responses to loss (grief). Second, children seemed to overcome their anxiety while talking about grief and grieving and were able to share relevant personal experiences. The study has important implications for curriculum development, pedagogical practice, and teacher training on death education.

What do teachers think of death education?

The sample comprised 683 teachers from a range of schools. The results show moderately positive attitudes toward death education. Variables such as gender, age, type of teacher, and religious beliefs all influenced results. The findings argue in favor of the inclusion of death education and teacher training.

Implementation of Death Education Programs

Given the likelihood of parental concern, it is important to fully inform parents and guardians of the nature and scope of formal programs and their benefits and elicit informed consent. This includes providing written documentation of what is planned and a chance to meet if they have any questions. Professional training for teaching about death and bereavement takes the form of readings and continuing education (e.g., a formal death education course, workshops, a hospice training course). Trainers also suggest that educators spend some time processing their own feelings and experiences about the topics covered.

Among the considerations and recommendations for program implementation are:

Age – Most students encounter death in what they regularly hear, read, and experience through media. With this in mind, death education advocates argue that programs should be implemented at every school level, taking into consideration students stage of development and individual differences. At the elementary school level, the immediate focus is on understanding the death of a pet, friend, relative. In middle school classes, the focus can be broadened to deaths related to reckless behaviors and suicide and be linked to prevention. By high school, the topic of death connects with many courses. At all levels there are teachable moments.

Scheduling –Introducing a formal program late in the school year allows for developing student and teacher readiness. And because the program may produce some tension, it also is advisable to schedule at a time of day that precedes activities where stress can be reduced (e.g., physical education, lunch, recess).

Length of program – Research has shown that death education programs of six 30- to 45-minute presentations were successful in enhancing understanding the concepts taught.

Course integration – Asked about integrating death education, educators indicated a variety of classes. (They also pointed to the use of guidance counselors and school psychologists.) For instance, music classes could add discussion of music involved in funerals and death rituals, art classes could discuss and create art inspired by death, history classes can discuss the consequences of plagues and war. Many courses can cover cultural and religious views of death, with no one religion or culture favored.

Business majors could look at such things as pre-planning the cost of hospice, cost of funerals, making living wills and trusts. Science can look at the biology, chemistry, and ecology/recycling—what happens to dead animals and plants. ... In Social Studies ... the social customs of different cultures/ societies and how death influences behavior—from the death of public leaders to death in war all of which can be on the proficiency test, making the topic relevant to all students and justifiable in the curriculum. King-McKenzie

About Responding to Students who are Grieving

While death education covers grief and bereavement, as schools have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, they must be able to respond when a student actually experiences a major loss and is grieving. Students and staff die. There are deaths in the family. Pets die. Parents divorce. Friends move away. And on and on.

Is the suicide rate among adolescents as high as it is because the youngsters have too little understanding of the finality of death?

Clearly, school staff must be prepared to handle grief reactions. The immediate response involves ensuring a safe and supportive environment for the student to work through grief. Sometimes all a bereaved student needs is a nurturing environment – one where adults will listen and provide support.

In cases where more specialized help is necessary referrals for mental health intervention usually are made to support the student.

For a quick overview, see the Center's one page practice notes on *Grief and Loss*. For more resources, see our Center's Quick Find on *Grief and Bereavement*. It has links to relevant materials from our Center as well as links to other materials and agencies on the internet.

Note that in our Center's work, we embed addressing grief into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports and specifically into the domain of *crisis response and prevention*. See *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*

Concluding Comments

This brief discussion has emphasized potential benefits of using death education to enhance understanding and to discuss death, dying, bereavement, and grief. At the same time, as with all uncomfortable (and politically controversial) topics, there are concerns that some students will experience negative effects. That is why a parent's consent is important. That is why planning and implementation must reflect a sophisticated awareness of how to facilitate student readiness in terms of both motivation and capability (what Kailen Stover refers to as "building students up.") And that is why those providing death education need to be alert for and take corrective actions to address negative effects.

Educators with regular close contact to students and who are trusted play an important role in the lives of their students. The more sophisticated they become about whole child development, the more likely they are to appreciate the importance of broadening the focus of schooling to include topics such as death and bereavement. At the same time, it is clear that there is limited time for teaching during every school year, and this reality calls for finding ways to embed death education into existing curricula and using natural opportunities as teachable moments.

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Note:

The [Center for Death Education and Bioethics at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse](https://www.cedebioethics.org/) is a resource that “aims to normalize conversations about loss, death, dying, grief and bereavement and share resources.” Visit their website for upcoming events, educational opportunities, current research studies and more