

## **Coping After Sudden Traumatic Death: Teacher Guidelines**

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### ***How should I talk about the incident with my students?***

Avoid editorializing or moralizing at this time. These very sad events are best described to students as “unfortunate tragic accidents”

### ***What should I do if a student becomes emotional in my class?***

1. Do not immediately send the student out of the class to a counselor. This sends a message out to all students that emotions are not normal and should not be expressed.
2. Some teachers encourage emotional expression by keeping a large box of tissues on their desk during periods of mourning.
3. Grief comes & goes and can be triggered by a variety of cues. If a student suddenly becomes emotional in your classroom, that is okay. “Acknowledge-Honor - Validate” the emotion/loss and then move on with your planned lesson.
4. All emotions that the students may experience are okay. You can, however, set limits on the form of emotional expression. For example, you can encourage a student to talk about his pain rather than banging his hand on the desk or acting defiant in class.
5. Note that some students will have no emotional reaction. This is also okay.

### ***What can I do to help the students with their grief?***

1. Emotional expression is a healthy way of processing the tragedy. If you feel comfortable, encourage the students to share their feelings. Expressing feelings is better than acting them out (e.g. vandalism, violence) or attempting to numb to the pain (e.g. substance abuse).
2. School routines, guided peer interactions, distraction and athletics are natural coping strategies that the students can use.
3. Anger, blaming, guilt and even joking are common ways the students may try to gain control. Do not ignore these emotions but reframe them as normal reactions to the shock of sudden loss.
4. Teachers can disclose their own sadness about the loss to the students if that is what they genuinely experience and model for the students how they personally cope with painful emotions (e.g. pray, take walks, talk with friends).

5. Work with school and student leadership to channel the emotional energy that students may feel at this time into appropriate memorials for the deceased.

***What should I remember about the grief process?***

1. The challenge of grief is to mourn the life of the person and not their death. Grief is the price we pay for love and attachment.
2. Grief has no official time line. Mourning will be seen in different ways throughout the school year.
3. Death of a peer is hard for adolescents to understand because they are passing through developmental stages of omnipotence and invincibility. Allow them time for the reality of the deaths to be processed.

***When should the counseling staff be involved?***

1. Students should be told that counselors are available if they have painful emotions that will not stop or if they have thoughts that are troubling them (e.g. self-destructive impulses).
2. Maintain an open dialogue with the school's counseling staff if you notice a significant change in behavior and/or academic performance in a student.
3. Some of the students may also have witnessed the tragedies and may be suffering from upsetting images that they cannot "get out of their heads". Students who disclose this information should be referred to a school counselor.
4. Some students may be preoccupied with feelings of guilt for real or imagined responsibility to the tragedies or if there were problems in their relationship(s) with the deceased. School counseling staff can help these students feel relief from these painful feelings.

***What else should I be concerned about?***

1. Your fellow faculty members will also be mourning. "Acknowledge – Honor - Validate" their emotions/loss also.
2. Rumors and gossip often follow in the aftermath of tragedies. Try not to provide an audience in your classroom for these problematic coping strategies. Innocent people are often hurt by these discussions. Alert school administration about any rumors you may hear.

3. Some students often look for connections between the tragedies and other factors. This form of “magical thinking” is the basis of most superstitions and is developmentally rooted in their early childhoods when they tried to understand an often confusing world.

***How should I work with the parents of my students?***

1. Families differ in terms of the ways they handle emotional experiences. Remember they have the primary responsibility for their children. Respect the variety of ways that parents may choose to handle these losses in their children’s lives.
2. Keep the families informed of any significant changes you note in their children.
3. Family religious beliefs and/or cultural practices are often major sources of comfort for the families.

***How long will the impact of these tragedies affect the students?***

1. Expect problems in attention, concentration and short-term memory in some of your students to last for at least the next several months.
2. You should maintain your academic standards during this period of mourning but provide additional educational supports whenever possible.
3. Note that future anniversaries, school milestones (e.g. proms), media interest and legal proceedings will cause these painful experiences to be triggered.