

In-Servicing Teachers on Their Role in Crisis Response: Supporting Students in the Aftermath of Tragedy and Crisis

Guidelines for Teachers

Adapted and Used by permission from
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God bless you for all you do with your students every single day. More than anyone will ever really be able to recognize, your students are so very blessed to have you showing up in their lives with your concern and compassion day after day, in the midst of all of the demands that our new educational world places on you.

A Philosophical "Set"

Reinforce that this is about "Working smarter, not harder."

Teachers don't have to become "instant counselors."

This will help them both professionally and personally.

These skills and concepts apply both to school-wide tragedies and for working with the one student who loses a loved one.

Teachable Moments

Many opportunities every year

National and local events

Value of grief as a concept prior to an experience

Value in Acceptance, Compassion, School Climate

Teaches empathy as an every-day value

Language and concepts integrated into conversations

Concern for others – students tell what they know

Lessons and attitudes begin to transfer over to anti-bullying concepts

Teaching teachers language and concepts takes it directly to the students

Moves beyond a "program" to attitudes

Tasks of Grief as a Basis (Dr. Alan Wolfelt)

To hear the truth

To put our own words to the reality

To share the memories with others

To give the death meaning

To examine identity

To have a memorial/ritual of passage

Continued support

Activities and Discussions

Look for assisting in task mastery
Does this help students understand the truth?
Am I giving them time to use their own words?
Am I giving time for them to share memories?
Quiet time for reflection (identity)

Role of Ritual

Provides a turning point
Allows making of amends
Does not have to be complex or sophisticated
Teaches how to create ritual for the future
Examples of Ritual:
Letters burned following a suicide
Flowers at graduation

Teacher Reluctance

Weren't trained for it – might lose composure
No language or conceptual foundation
Fears that family members will object
Some of the incidents are complex, fear-invoking
Concepts above the developmental stage of students

Basics

You don't have to be a counselor
You can't take away their pain
Avoiding it gives students the message that they are on their own
Students are seldom reluctant to talk about it
May not have words and concepts
May have fears, anxieties they are hiding
Often feel relief that someone brings it up

Anatomy of a Discussion: State the Obvious

Lets students know you are tuned in to them
Validates their perceptions
Gives concrete information
Doesn't make a judgment
What a video camera would validate
“This may be the first time some of you have known someone who When it happens, we have a variety of thoughts and feelings that come up. Some might be really sad and some might be fearful or angry. There are lots of other feelings, too.”

Give Some Examples

“Sometimes when we lose someone to death, we begin to have fears that more people we love will die.”

“Sometimes when a friend loses someone close to them, we don’t know whether to bring it up or never talk about it.”

Ask Questions

“How many of you had already heard about this? What did you hear?”

“How many of you have lost someone close to you? What things did anyone do that helped you or your family?”

“What are things that we can think of to help a friend?”

Invite Other Concerns

“What do you think worries your peers at this point?”

“Are there other things that are bothering you?”

“What could I do that would help?”

“What do you wish adults understood about how it is to be a child today?”

Teachers’ Role

May read announcement of the death to students

Lead discussion with students

May lead activity of some sort

Return to academics when majority is ready

Come to meetings before and after school

Identify and refer students with extreme reactions

Easy Activities to Move Students Further into Discussion

Write a letter of regret and appreciation

Break students into small groups and give questions

“If you lost friend, would you want your peers to bring it up when you came to school?”

Only close friends? Most of your friends? Anyone?”

“What are three things you can do to show someone that you care?”

When did you first realize that everyone would die someday?”

Remind Teachers

Just Being there is the most important thing

They already do this naturally...we are just adding concepts and language

When someone close dies, often a student does not “hit bottom” in their struggle for several months. The second year may be worse than the first.

Don’t let go of discipline, but use a gentle touch

Remind teachers that their students are blessed to have them

They are only as good for their kids as they are good to themselves

Crisis Response Checklist

Note: It is essential to protect the family's integrity in the process of meeting the students' needs. This should be considered in each decision.

<u>YES/NO</u>	<u>ACTIVITY</u>	<u>PERSON RESPONSIBLE</u>
_____	Verify facts	_____
_____	Notify Headmaster and District Staff	_____
_____	Contact pastoral support	_____
_____	Designate family liaison	_____
_____	Make parent contact	_____
_____	Begin staff notification	_____
_____	Call Crisis Response planning meeting	_____
_____	Plan for staff support needs	_____
_____	Write announcement to be read to students	_____
_____	Set up designated Safe Room	_____
_____	Identify close friends and at-risk students	_____
_____	Prepare letter for parents of student body	_____
_____	Organize after school meeting	_____
_____	Set plan for follow-up needs/debriefing	_____
_____	• Staff	_____
_____	• Student body	_____
_____	• At-risk students	_____

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Handling the Classroom after a Crisis

Remember this! Students simply need you to be there for them. They need time to explore the meaning of the event. Be consistent about discipline (though perhaps with a gentle touch) so there is enough structure for them to feel safe. Allowing students to see your grief is a gift as you model expressing feelings.

A Social Worker can read the announcement to your students if you'd prefer, but remain in the room so you can see students' reactions. After the announcement, take time to do some processing. Share your own feelings. Avoid blame or guilt. Help students talk about their feelings, recognizing that this will be a tough day for some, and that all students need to behave respectfully and responsibly for themselves and towards others.

The Classroom Discussion

State what you see and hear. It:

Validates their perceptions.

Lets kids know you are paying attention.

Gives concrete information.

May give words to their feelings.

Doesn't make a judgment

Don't force the student to talk, but be sure all who wish to speak have the opportunity. Realize the importance of truth. If there are aspects of the event that are inappropriate for students to hear, be honest in saying that you aren't able to talk about that part at this point. Because students are thirsting for information, this sometimes makes them angry or frightened. Ask them how it is for them when they can't have all of the details. Validate their frustration. It is based on a very basic need to know. Grief as a response to different losses is varied. Allow for these differences. This is a good time to remember that you can't take away their pain. You can just be there for them.

Avoid being judgmental, giving advice, or giving you own answers. Stick to the truth and then encourage students to explore it and come up with their own answers.

Allow time for:

Drawing pictures

Writing

Quiet reflection

Gathering with peers to talk (under adult supervision)

Reminiscing and memory sharing

Accept feelings. ("It makes sense to me that you might feel that way.") Realize that students may have a variety of feelings about the event. Allow all feelings to be expressed. Support the honesty. Allow the day to move in and out of processing and academics, as students needs seem to dictate. Encourage students to use the Safe Room as needed. Getting the students who are struggling most down to the Safe Room allows your class to return to homeostasis more easily. Help kids network and participate in how to remember the student who has died. This meets a real need to help and provides closure for the initial

tasks of the grieving period. In the coming weeks, watch for signs of depression or changes in attendance, academic performance or behavior.

And take good care of yourself!

Processing a Crisis with Your Students: An Activity

If a student in your classroom has died during the year, you've put in some difficult hours with students in a realm a long way from anything we learned in our training! And yet these are incredibly teachable moments. Because one of the tasks of grief for students is to be able to put into context what death and life means, it is helpful to take a little time in the remainder of the year to give them an opportunity to revisit the loss.

One easy activity for any grade level is to get a long piece of butcher paper and draw a long line --maybe five to ten feet long. Once you have the line on the paper, put the school start date on one end and the school end date at the other end. Have students relate experiences they remember from the year. Start with having them think back to the very first of the year. Ask "What do you remember from the very beginning of the year? Let them add events from your classroom as well as those national events of importance to them - positive and negative. Get it all written up there.

If none of the students mentions the student who died, when they're feeling like the activity is nearly complete, you bring it up. This is a time to be both somewhat matter-of-fact ("and it was somewhere about here when _____ died, wasn't it? I'll put it right here.") and then just give it a few moments of silence and see how the students respond. Don't move on until they move on. You might even follow that up with "Some of you also had deaths in your families..." and see whether they want to add those to the line.

You might also note other losses, including students who moved away, weather-related events, etc. It isn't the goal to make death the focus, but rather to bring the reality of death into life; to put it in perspective; to help students see it in a bigger context.

Perhaps most important of all, it makes the statement to the students that every one of them is important...important enough that, at the end of the year, their presence may be gone, but their memory won't be forgotten.

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Crisis Response Continuum and the Social Worker Role

Teacher Self-Care

The most important thing to remember about teacher self-care is that if you do not take care of yourself first, you will not be able to adequately care for the needs of your students. As teachers, we know that the reason we are in the field of education is to make a difference in the lives of students. In order to do this effectively, we must care for ourselves all of the time, but even more so during times of crisis.

Ways to care for yourself year round and in times of crisis:

Daily time reading God's word

Daily prayer

Pray for God's guidance and support during times of crisis

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and You shall find rest for your soul. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light."

Take time to reflect on your own feelings during times of crisis

Matthew 6:6

"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

Talk with each other to discuss your feelings

Pray for each other and support one another

Romans 15:1,2

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

While we all know that these are important things to do to care for ourselves and our relationships with God and others, sometimes these things are the first to slip in the busy life of a teacher. If we can rely first on God, then on others God has placed in our lives during times of crisis we can better support those around us.

I know that as a teacher, I feel the need to be strong and care for the needs of my students and others when they are hurting. But if I have not dealt with my own grief from a situation of crisis then I am not capable of providing the strength and support that my students need from me. It is vitally important that as a teacher when I hear the news of a crisis situation that I have time to process and deal with my own response to the situation before I have to interact with my students. This means that I need time alone to cry, pray, and read the Word of God. It also means that I need time to talk to my colleagues and debrief with them about my thoughts and feelings. Your colleagues at work should be your support system, when a crisis occurs in your school. Find a friend with whom you can talk through your feelings about the situation and take time to pray together for one another.

When a child you are working with dies, what is your personal response?

What can you do to make sure that you take the time you need to care for yourself before returning to the your work?

How can caring for yourself make you a more effective and supportive social worker?

Activities and Teachable Moments

Intervention

Postvention

Teacher/

Student/
Family Care

Participate in Planning Toward Prevention

Social Worker's Role

Be Available at
High-Risk Times

Prevention