



## **How Should I React to a Student Who Has Experienced a Death?**

The best place to start is recognizing that YOU have a reaction. Take time to identify and experience your own feelings before you even think of trying to help your students deal with theirs. Whether or not you're consciously aware of it, your responses to the current event are affected by the ways in which you have handled previous losses in your life.

Think of it like this -- each of us, over the course of our lives, creates what can be called a 'grief closet'. This is the place within our psyche where all the things in life that have created feelings of grief are stored. The contents of this closet include our grief reactions to deaths as well as the myriad of smaller losses from our daily lives - losses related to friendships, opportunities, dreams, and aspirations - you name it, it goes into the grief closet!

Like the junk closet that you find in many homes, the grief closet is the place where we 'stuff' our reactions to these losses. These reactions don't disappear; they get jumbled haphazardly in the closet until they tumble out one day when we open the door to stuff another loss inside.

Before you try to sort out your feelings about this current loss, take a quick inventory of your grief closet. Taking inventory of your grief closet is helpful because simply understanding the connections between our reactions to previous losses [even those of dissimilar circumstances] helps us understand and manage our reactions to a current loss.

Here are some questions that may give you some help in 'closet cleaning':

1. What is the first death that you remember? How did you respond? How did those around you respond?
2. What's the most significant death you've experienced? How long ago did it happen? When you think of it now, are your feelings still stirred? What feelings are they?
3. What was your most recent loss? Is it still difficult to think about?
4. Have you had a loss experience similar to the one your school is currently facing? Do you still have feelings about it? What are they?

If you find that your answers to any of these questions are unsettling, talk about them with someone you trust. This might be a colleague, a friend, a family member- someone

you know will listen to what you have to say without trying to change or 'fix' your feelings. Talking about feelings is a proven strategy for decreasing their intensity and can often provide us with perspective or clarity.

Now spend a few minutes trying to digest and understand the information you received about this current death. Think about the answers to the following questions:

1. Is it a student or another member of the school community like a faculty member?
2. How well was the deceased integrated into the school community? (Whether or not we like to admit it, there is generally a greater reaction to the death of someone who is seen as an integral part of the school rather than someone who had a more marginal role.)
3. Was the death sudden or was it expected after a long illness? Were the circumstances violent?
4. If the death occurred as result of a car accident, were other students either from your school or neighboring schools injured or killed?
5. Did other students in the school or community witness the death?
6. Was it a parental death? Was the parent active in the school? How long are the bereaved children expected to be absent from school?
7. Will the event get media coverage?

The answers to these questions (as well as any others that seem relevant to you) will help you anticipate the degree of complexity of your own reactions as well as those within the school community.

Unless the death was anticipated from an illness, your initial response may be to ask **WHY?** Even though this question has no answer, you will continue to ask it until you reach some degree of acceptance about what's happened. Understand that this is the first question that the students will ask as well. You may need to remind both yourself and the students in those initial hours and days that the circumstances of the death don't matter in the long run -- what you all must deal with is the fact that this person has died.

If you are very upset about the death, examine your relationship to the deceased. Perhaps you were close to the student/faculty member/parent and are responding to the death in a personal way. You may also find yourself extremely affected if the death even touches your life in a tangential way- the deceased for example, is your age, or the age of your children. But if your reaction still surprises you, remember that other losses in your life may be reactivated by this loss, so go back and take another look at your grief closet inventory. If you still feel overwhelmed, seek out a member of your school's crisis team or guidance staff for support. If your school doesn't have these types of resources, find a member of your own personal support system with whom you can talk. And if you're uncomfortable with this type of self disclosure in your work setting, seek out community resources – like mental health professionals or clergy.

Awareness of your own personal reactions to a death is really essential in helping you separate your response from the reactions of your students. This awareness can also help you create an open climate where any student's reaction to the death is acceptable. Once you have taken time to understand your own responses, you will be able to do a better job in helping your students cope with theirs.