



How Can I Prepare for Topics in the Curriculum that Might Upset Grieving Students?

Teaching can be challenged enough without having to be concerned about whether a particular piece of the curriculum will be upsetting to a given student. Unfortunately, however, some students are vulnerable to material that stirs memories and feelings about traumatic life events like the death of someone important in their lives or disasters like September 11th or Hurricane Katrina.

What are some topics that may be upsetting reminders to my students?

- Reading - stories about death, suicide and homicide.
- History - review of traumatic historical events and upsetting current events
- Health Ed. - topics about death, suicide and alcoholism
- Driver's Ed. - discussions about driver safety, car accidents and/or drinking & driving
- Science - natural disasters like floods, hurricanes or fires and possibly topics like forensic science

In addition to specific curriculum content, also pay attention to your language when you cover this material. While slang expressions are acceptable in personal conversation, they have the potential to be offensive to vulnerable students, especially those who are grieving. For example, there are a variety of graphic descriptions used for violent deaths like homicide and suicide: blowing ones brains out, being wiped out, knocked off, etc. Equally offensive are descriptive idioms for mental illness: being nuts, wacko, looney...the list goes on. There is an excellent chance, simply based on the statistics of occurrence, that there will be students in all of your classes who have personal experience with one or another of these traumatic events or illnesses. Your sensitivity to the way in which these topics are discussed can go a long way towards decreasing the stigma that often surrounds them. It helps, of course, if you can identify the students who might be upset by a particular topic prior to the lesson. If they indicate that they would be uncomfortable remaining in class, give them an alternative assignment to work on in another location, like the library.

The students you don't know about are more difficult. Here are some suggestions for managing them:

- When you are reviewing your class roster, don't forget to include students who have been affected by some type of loss in the last several years because their losses can be reactivated even after time has elapsed.
- Review your curriculum materials for topics that might be sensitive to any type of loss or trauma so you can anticipate potentially challenging areas.

- Consider the use of some type of general disclaimer at the beginning of the school year, e.g. “Sometimes things we talk about in the classroom can be upsetting. If we are covering a topic that is personally upsetting or distressing to you, let me know privately and I will see how we can handle it.”
- Ask a member of your school’s crisis response team for suggestions for responding to a student who might get upset in the classroom.