Supporting Youth in Grief: Reference for School Staff

Students may benefit from:

1. The truth about what has happened. If there are aspects of the death or event which are too gory or too difficult to talk about, it is better, to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity and is essential for your credibility.

2. The opportunity to talk about the event as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others have had similar experiences. Talking eases the pressure we feel inside.

3. Understanding that this event might be a "trigger" that is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in past times of loss, threat or fear. It helps them to know that this reaction is not unusual.

4. Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that those who come from dysfunctional homes will likely have less ability to cope with grief.

5. Being allowed to leave class or take a break when they need it, even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on school work until they've had the opportunity to process the loss. Suspend judgement about who needs a break. Consider providing a staffed space for students to go if they need a place to process.

6. Help with understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service. As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students, asking about their experience with such services and, if appropriate, let them know what to expect with this one.

7. Continued structure in the day's schedule. It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school, where they can grieve with others. They usually benefit from the usual class schedule and the sense of routine. Suspend academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last twenty minutes or the whole class period; in others, all day. While the students need that flexibility in terms of having time out of academics to get back on their feet, the routine of school bells and class periods gives them a sense of some things still being predictable. Too much "looseness" furthers their sense of uncertainty.

8. Consistency in discipline, with flexibility. Often at these times, students feel life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behaviours are not within the norm. Exceptions may be made in regard to expectations on academics, but sometimes, some students act out in order to feel a sense of control, which leaves others feeling unsafe or may actually endanger others. No student should be allowed to act out aggressively or dangerously.

9. Students are not so much in need for you to become an instant counsellor, but rather to "be there for them" Let them talk about their fears and feelings. Help them feel safe and not judged. The first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions: Encourage students to:

- Support each other, helping one another get through the day
- Put extra energy into friendships
- Take good care of themselves by eating well and getting lots of rest.

Needs of the Students

- An honest accounting of facts and relevant details as appropriate
- An opportunity to verbally or actively process the event:
    - Talking, drawing pictures, listening to stories, hearing others talk
    - To be actively involved in doing something helpful: cards for the family, planning a memorial activity for school
    - An opportunity to ask questions
- Time for this to sink in
- To address issues or rephrase the same question again
- To know how the family is doing and whether there will be a funeral
- To be able to grieve with others in the context in which the deceased was known
- To express their feelings, share memories and cry together
- For adults to model their own feelings
- Lots of reassurance; students need their feelings and experience validated
- Encouragement to realize that love goes on (gone but not forgotten)
- Help with understanding that pain eases over time as we process
- Support from adults knowing that going in and out of grief or worry is fine
- Support their thoughts and feelings
- Expectation of appropriate behaviour
- Continued structure
- Stable environment with predictable schedule