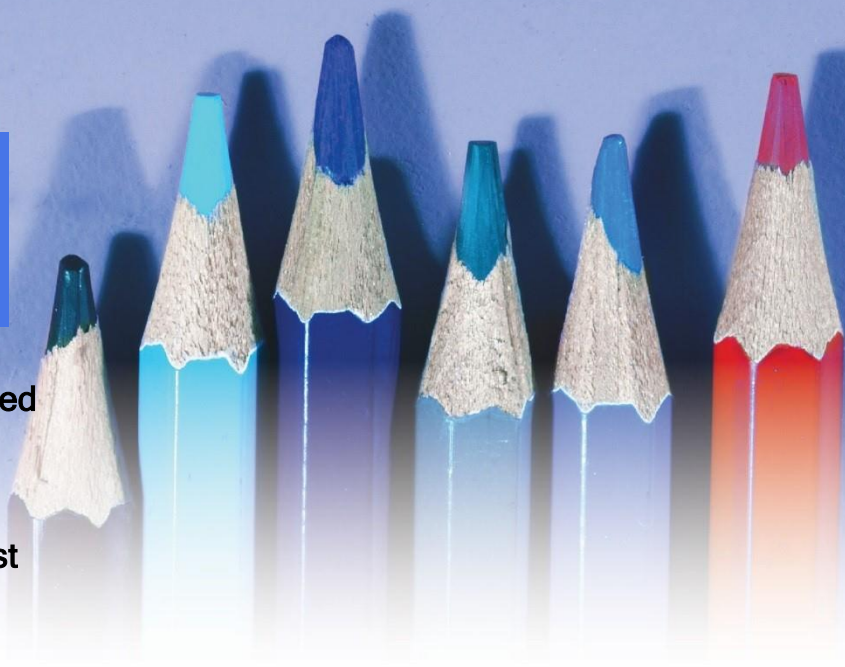


GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE 9-12 CLASSROOM

Working within a school, you will likely connect with a student or classroom impacted by a death.

Based on what we know from our work with grieving students at Good Grief of Northwest Ohio, we have compiled these tips for supporting students after a death.



Helping grieving students in the classroom.

Listen.

- Talk to your class about how grief affects people differently.
- Encourage them to share how they feel.
- Listen to what students want to share about their experience.
- Let them know you are available to listen.

Protect.

- Be aware of what information you are sharing and why you are sharing that information.
- Normalize an emotional response.
- Discourage students from negatively responding to emotions of others.

Good Grief of Northwest Ohio provides peer support groups for children and teens who are grieving. All Good Grief programs are offered at no cost to participants and meet in our Reynolds Road program space.

Connect.

- Check in with student and/or classroom on how they are feeling, days or weeks after the news.
- Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate or the classmates grieving family. (Write a letter, create a card).
- Invite school counselor to class to educate students on healthy coping skills.

Model.

- Share and normalize your own emotions to the class.
- Using language that is helpful for students to understand. (Instead of “committed” say “died by”. Instead of “passed away, lost” use “died, dead”).
- Provide flexibility and support to the grieving student or the grieving class.

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How to help

Behavioral Changes

- Withdrawal from parents and other adults
- Angry outburst
- Increased physical concern including headaches, stomach aches, and body aches
- Increased risk-taking behaviors such as substance use, reckless driving, sexual behaviors, etc.
- Pushing the limits of the rules
- Lack of communication, inability to focus
- Hanging out with a small group of friends
- Sad faces, evidence of crying
- Sleepiness, exhaustion
- Forgetfulness
- Sudden fears or anxiety

- Allow for regression and dependency
- Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret, etc.
- Acknowledge physical concerns
- Understand and allow for variation in maturity level
- Answer questions honestly and provide factual information
- Model appropriate responses, share with the students your own feelings/emotions
- Avoid power struggles and allow choices
- Allow for some flexibility in their assignments
- Have students identify supportive adult they can share with
- Create a “safe space” student can go when needed
- Let them know you are here to listen

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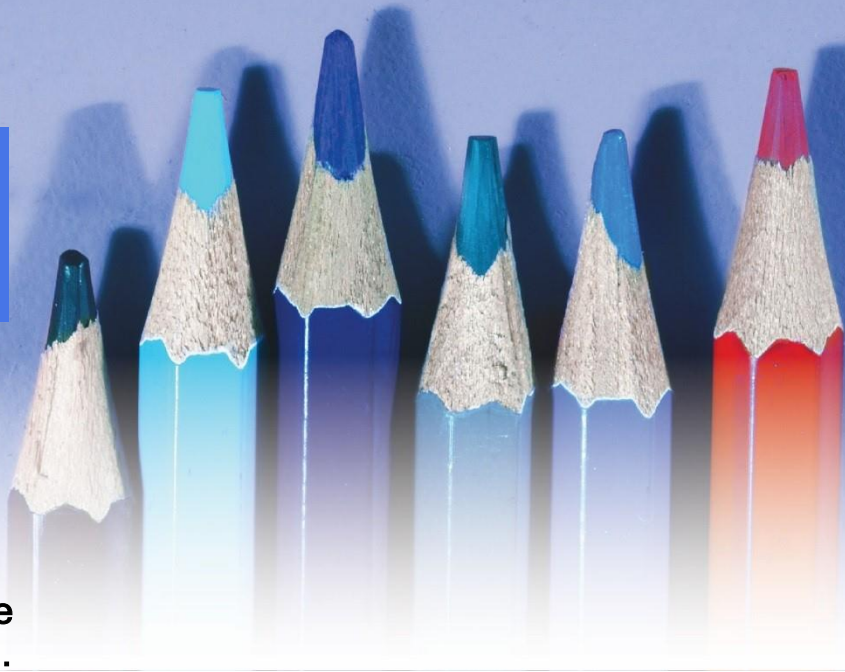


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Try to...

- Let the student or class know that you are aware of what has happened
- Acknowledge the grief
- Let the student or class know you are available to listen if they want to talk about how they are feeling
- Talk with family about sharing appropriate information with the class
- Be flexible with students as they are navigating many changes in their feelings and emotions
- Be aware of social media, encourage students not to speculate on any information
- Remind students to respect their peers
- Discuss memorial plans with students, giving specific times, dates, and lengths of acknowledgement
- Understand your limitations by acknowledging your own grief and your comfort level
- Normalize an emotional response to discourage students from negatively addressing an emotional student

Try not to...

- Suggest that the student has grieved long enough
- Indicate that the student should move on
- Use platitudes such as “it could be worse” “they are in a better place”
- Overshare your own grief experience
- Tell a student how they should grieve
- Force them to talk about the death
- Single out the grieving student from their peers
- Find the silver lining in the student’s experience
- Let the students age determine the value or impact of their grief experience
- Avoid the student because you do not know what to say

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How to tell students about a death.

- **Have students sit in a circle or in chairs rather than desks.**
This creates an environment in which students may be better able to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions. This set up also encourages support and community in the classroom.
- **Ask students if they know what happened.**
Allow them to share what they know or think they know about the death.
- **Share the information that you have about the death directly and honestly.**
Acknowledge that students may have heard other details about the death, remind students that sharing untrue information may hurt the student or student's family.
- **Allow students to ask questions.**
Answer the questions as best as you can. It is okay to say "I don't know" if you don't know the answer.
- **Allow willing students to share their experience and feelings about the death along with other deaths they have experienced.**
Sharing can help students identify similarities among each other.
- **Normalize different thoughts and feelings.**
Identify grief as an individual experience. Validate the emotions of students as they present themselves. If comfortable, share your own thought and feelings about the death.
- **Identify healthy coping skills.**
Educate helpful ways to manage grief (journaling, taking a walk, talking with a friend).
Establish a safe space within the school where students will feel supported.
- **Help students identify supportive people in various environments.**
Home (parent, guardian, sibling), School (teacher, administrator, school counselor), After School Program (mentor, peer), Sports Team (coach, teammate), Childcare Center (trusted adult).

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Memorialization

Ideas

- Moment of silence
- Candlelight vigil
- Decorate student's locker
- Create a temporary space for students to write messages or cards to family
- Memorial table with photo display
- Living memorial for future students including a character award or scholarship opportunity
- Award posthumous diploma
- Plant a tree or shrub in memory of
- A memorial page in the yearbook
- Class contribution of a memorial plaque, brick, or stone to school grounds

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Things to Remember

- Keep distinct timelines for memorialization (Tuesday from 6-8, Friday before School 7-8)
- Glorifying memorials for a student who died by suicide can increase suicidal ideation among students
- Designate a school staff person(s) to coordinate a memorial gathering
- Include students in the planning of a memorial
- Include age-appropriate activities for remembrance
- Invite the family to be a part of the memorial
- Provide students with additional support services within the school if they are feeling overwhelmed with emotion
- Model appropriate emotional response
- Acknowledge cultural sensitivity
- Allow for voluntary participation in any and all memorial opportunities
- Schools may have more than one death per school year, recognition should be comparable
- The school community is a supportive environment for students both educationally and emotionally. Students often come to school for comfort after learning of a death

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