

HELPING STUDENTS COPE WITH TRAGIC LOSS

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News of a teacher's sudden death reverberates throughout a school community. People feel shock and disbelief, as well as immediate concern for the student and family. Faculty, staff, and parents also want to be helpful, but often have trouble themselves understanding how such a thing could happen. They may find themselves reminded of major losses in their own lives and families. They often worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect way to respond, here are some steps that can make a positive difference in talking with students.

1. Don't over-assume what this means to them. They react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, and so on. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Many will *not* be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does not automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings. At the same time, some students who have little immediate reaction may become upset later on, even in a way that doesn't make sense to them. There is no universal timetable.

2. Children and adolescents are remarkably resilient. Some may become quite upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, most usually resume their normal lives—and often do so more rapidly than adults. There is reason to worry about students who show *sustained* changes in their mood and behavior. In such cases, it is good to consult a school counselor or other professional. But most students do *not* benefit from extensive, probing questions about their reactions and how they're feeling. They do profit from simple, direct information and from school staff, and parents being available to respond to their questions and to listen when they themselves want to talk.

3. If you receive difficult questions it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a question is spurred by a feeling. Rather than plunging into an immediate answer, it can be good to learn what motivated the question by asking, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Once you know the source of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.

4. There may be questions you cannot answer, which can make anyone feel inadequate. But all of us are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than to invent a response, it can be much more helpful to say, "I don't know," or, "Did you have an idea about that?" Don't worry if, in responding, you become emotional yourself. It is very helpful for students to know that adults are moved by tragic loss.

5. If students raise specific questions about the death, it is good to acknowledge their distress, but validate the idea that we all need privacy, especially at vulnerable moments. Students and adults alike will do well to be sensitive to the needs and preferences of the bereaved family, so well-intended efforts to offer support and help will truly be experienced as helpful.

6. Above all, coping with a tragic death is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a particular set of tactics that deviate sharply from one's familiar patterns of communication. The regular routines of school and of family life, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Adults will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and students—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—your simply being with students, their knowing that you are available—can be very reassuring.

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