



SUPPORTING GRIEVING STUDENTS IN THIS TIME OF COVID-19



No time is a good time for a student to grieve the death of a loved one. But the uncertain days of a pandemic is a particularly difficult period for any child to be experiencing grief.

As trusted adults in the lives of students, teachers and other school personnel can play an important role in supporting these grieving children.

Students react to a death in many different ways, with or without a pandemic. They feel confused, out of control, and unsure. They feel distracted and forgetful. There are fears of leaving their other family members.

Students also worry about having a sudden outburst of tears in front of classmates. They feel different, not understood by their peers who haven't experienced a death. And — it's important to remember — there's no time limit to any of these feelings and reactions.

LOSS ON TOP OF LOSS

The current pandemic can add further complications to the grief of these students,

who are now experiencing other losses in addition to the death of their loved one. These additional losses intensify the grief they're already experiencing.

There are lost jobs, lost finances, lost relationships. Graduations, games and other major events are cancelled. There's no going out to dinner, movies, concerts, parties. Friends and family can't be seen as often, if at all. School is very different from what has been known so well for so long.

And, if a loved one has died during the pandemic, many families have also missed the opportunity to be by their loved one's side when they died. Or haven't been able to attend the funeral or memorial service in order to say goodbye in the ways they want to.

COLLECTIVE GRIEF

Collective grief is felt by a group. It is mourning that is shared, through losses due to causes like natural disasters, the death of a public figure, or a pandemic.

We're all living in a collective sense of grief. We can't turn on the television or look at our phones without seeing the impact that Covid-19 has had in our community, state, country or the world.

We're affected by daily reports of people getting sick, of people dying, and by constant reminders of ways to try to stay safe. And whether or not they have lost someone personally, many are grieving along with, or in honor of, those who have lost a loved one.

In times of collective grief, there are often ways for a community to come together and mourn. However, due to the need for social distancing, our loss of opportunities to collectively grieve the effects of this tragedy is taking its toll. People of all ages are missing the important occasions for talking about their losses, along with the rituals that often help us manage them. The loss of these kinds of opportunities can increase our feelings of isolation and loneliness.

SUPPORT FOR GRIEVING STUDENTS – CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

Schools are a community for their students. For grieving students, schools offer the chance to connect with caring peers and adults — a connection which can be very healing. Unfortunately, social connections of all kinds have diminished greatly in this time of social distancing. Grieving students already feel alone in their grief. Being disconnected from their peers reduces the chance to feel heard, cared for, and supported.

On top of that, when classes are attended in an online setting, grieving students miss out on getting that natural break from their grief environment. Rather than stepping away for a large part of the day, these students must

stay inside the same space all day with reminders of the absence of their loved one, remaining in the home with their grieving family members, in the place where they are experiencing so many changes to their lives and the lives of their families.

For teachers and other school personnel, it's challenging in the best of times to recognize those students who could be experiencing grief, and to perceive what level of support the students might need. We use all the cues we can gather in order to read a student's emotions and needs. Even face-to-face this isn't an easy task.



It's only gotten more difficult in these days of masks and social distancing, of virtual lessons and classrooms on computer screens. And even when we can see that a child needs help, figuring out how to respond to a child in distress when our only connection is through a computer, in full view of all the other students, is not a simple problem.



SUPPORT FOR GRIEVING STUDENTS – PAYING ATTENTION TO SIGNALS

However, much of what you already do to recognize and support students in need (including grieving students) can be applied now as well.

For one thing, you can rely on the knowledge and relationships you have with the students. Based on what you already know, pay attention to changes in students' behavior and affect.

You might notice changes like decreased participation or not showing up for scheduled classes. Or an inability to sit in their seat or pay attention to the screen. They might prefer having their monitor or sound off during class. Or the student might be tearful, or have a flat affect. Even if the students are new to you, some of these behaviors might stand out to you.

As you notice changes, remember that it's all right to engage in conversation with students and their families about what you're seeing, checking in with them about how they're feeling. The well-being of the child—and of their family—has a big effect on the student's ability to be successful in the school setting.

WAYS TO HELP GRIEVING STUDENTS

We've pulled together some ideas for ways in which grieving students can be supported. Many of these options can be adapted to work in either the school setting or the online setting.

COMMUNICATE WITH THE STUDENT'S FAMILY: Ask what would help make the grieving student comfortable when they return to school. Continue the communica-

tion as the school year progresses.

DESIGNATE A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CONTACT: A grieving student may need additional support during the school day. Help to identify a school contact person that the student can talk to when struggling — whether a school counselor or social worker, or the nurse, gym teacher or other trusted staff member.

COMMUNICATION AMONG THE SCHOOL STAFF: Reach out to teachers, counselors or others that the student has interacted with, either currently or in the past, to learn about specific losses or challenges that could carry over from one year to the next. This may be something better set up by the administration, but it can offer valuable insight into a child's behaviors, difficulties and reactions.

WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE STUDENT: Beyond simply talking with the student before or after class, sometimes an email message or a handwritten note can let a student know you care. Office hours might also be an option, letting the student know when you can be available if they have questions or concerns.

OFFER A GRIEF PASS: A grief pass offers a discrete way to allow students to notify their teachers that they might need a break from class to discuss their grief with their identified support person. This can be in a form of a physical pass or item, or it may be an unspoken understanding that the student can be excused during the class period to go to their designated location. A similar understanding can be worked out for online classes. During a school day, grieving students may need a break; having permission to turn their screen or their sound off could be helpful.

HELP STUDENTS IDENTIFY POSITIVE

COPING SKILLS: Students can be encouraged to experiment with different coping skills throughout the day. Breathing is one of the simplest (and most necessary) things that we encourage students to do, especially if they begin to feel sad or frustrated. Drawing or reading alone can be helpful, or talking with a trusted adult. Students can write down these and other coping skills so they can draw on them when needed.

ALLOW PHONE CALLS TO THEIR ADULT:

Often times grieving students worry about their surviving family members or that something might happen to someone else in their family. Allowing phone calls to family

members can provide reassurance to a grieving child that their other family members are safe. This might seem to be less necessary when the child is already at home, but if their adult is working outside of the house, it might still be an important outlet for them.

MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY & ROUTINES, WHILE OFFERING FLEXIBILITY:

Allowing students to return to a classroom that still functions on the same expectations and schedule as before is important for the student's sense of normalcy and stability. On the other hand, it is also important to keep in mind that grieving students might have a shorter attention span and more difficulty concentrating on school work.



ADJUST WORK ASSIGNMENTS IF

POSSIBLE: Students and teachers both have many responsibilities when it comes to the school day, so it's not always easy to be flexible with assignments. But not only are grieving students easily distracted and have difficulty with concentration and memory, there are also many changes going on in their homes that can add to the chaos in their lives. To the extent possible, teachers can work with grieving students and their parents or guardians to create a reasonable plan to have work completed, given the child's particular circumstances.

BE A LISTENING EAR: Being an active listener doesn't just show that you care; it also shows that you aren't judging the grieving student. Instead of preparing how you are going to respond, you can simply listen to take in what they share of their story, their feelings, and their memories. This helps students continue to process the loss along their journey of grief. Remember too that the death is not all that is happening in their

lives, so listening about that special grade, video game, performance or the home run they just hit is important as well.

PROVIDE REASSURANCE THAT ALL FEELINGS ARE OK: Grieving students are often confused about the many feelings they have after the death of a loved one. It's important to let grieving students know that they can experience their feelings. Many times, well-meaning adults advise grieving students to feel a certain way, to act a certain way, or to be a certain way. But feeling their feelings and discussing them allows students to normalize the feelings that they're having, to identify and label them, and then be able to process them.

HIGHMARK CARING PLACE'S SUPPORT FOR THE SCHOOL DURING THIS TIME OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

For the health and safety of everyone, in-person visits to schools by Highmark Caring Place staff members are currently on hold. But there are other ways of working with students and school staff. Contact the Highmark Caring Place for information about virtual support.

OFFER PEER SUPPORT GROUPS FOR YOUR STUDENTS: Grieving students often share with us that they feel different from their peers, and that they feel alone, awkward, and don't know any other students at their school who have had someone close to them die. Having peer support groups helps connect grieving students to others in their school who have also experienced a death, and also links students to peers who understand what they're going through.

OFFER CLASSROOM PRESENTATIONS FOR YOUR STUDENTS: The Highmark



Caring Place can also provide virtual classroom presentations to students of all ages. This can help to normalize the topic of grief and allow those students who have already experienced a death to see that they're not alone.

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Highmark Caring Place staff is available to consult with schools, provide virtual trainings to school staff members, or to provide referrals to families in need.

Some families need additional support or resources beyond what the school can offer. The Highmark Caring Place can be that resource for grieving children and families. Contact the Highmark Caring Place with any questions you might have or with additional needs your school or grieving students may have. And let the families know that they can always contact the Highmark Caring Place as well.

PITTSBURGH REGION - 888.224.4673

WARRENDALE REGION - 888.734.4073

ERIE REGION - 866.212.4673

HARRISBURG REGION - 866.613.4673

www.HighmarkCaringPlace.com/contact

