

Essential Discussions About Grief in School Settings



**Grief
Connection
Space**

**School Based
Mental Health Roundtable
April 25, 2025**

2



Michelle Halm, LPC, FT, PEL

With over fifteen years of experience in bereavement support, Michelle Halm is the Founder and Principal Facilitator at Grief Connection Space. Previously she was the Director of Buddy's Place and School-Based Partnerships at Pillars Community Health and a high school social studies teacher.

Additional Roles:

- Staff Therapist at [Bridgepoint Psychology Center](#)
- Founding Board Member for [Grief Care Network](#)
- Contributor to various publications, including toolkits for the National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG).

Certifications/Credentials:

- Licensed Professional Counselor (LCPC-eligible)
- PEL (School Counseling and Secondary Education)
- Fellow in Thanatology (FT) through Association for Death Education and Counseling
- Certified grief support specialist from UW-Madison
- Certified trainer for the National Council for Mental Wellness in Youth Mental Health First Aid and Teen Mental Health First Aid
- Culturally Informed Response to Grief and Loss Certification



Sara Buttitta, LSW

Sara's community-focused work has given her a deep understanding of grief and bereavement support from both clinical and outreach perspectives. She is dedicated to providing compassionate care to help individuals heal and navigate one of life's most challenging experiences.

Certifications/Credentials:

- Licensed Social Worker
- MSW from Dominican University
- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Culturally Informed Response to Grief and Loss Certification

Key Skills and Experience:

- Clinical Internship as Bereavement Counselor at Lightways Hospice and Serious Illness Care
- Internship with Pillars Community Health's Buddy's Place Program
- More than ten years of experience with program and curriculum development, working with local schools and community based organizations
- Strong background in education, community outreach and facilitating family based programming for cultural organizations.



Elizabeth Otto Haskins

Elizabeth is an experienced and compassionate professional with a strong foundation in community engagement, philanthropy, and grief support. She is committed to applying her expertise to uplift communities to provide meaningful bereavement care.

Certifications

- Grief Care Professional, Certification by PESI
- Youth Mental Health First Aid

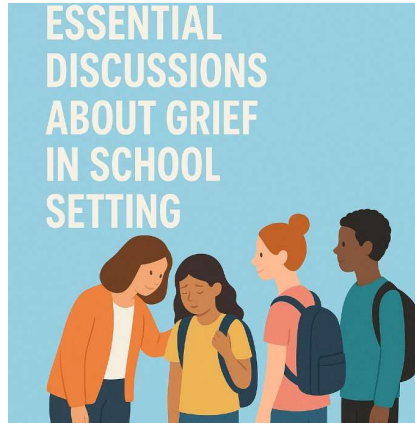
Key Skills and Experience:

- Volunteer coordination and philanthropic program coordination
- Skilled in organizing community events and managing sponsorships, with a focus on initiatives supporting children and families
- Committed to developing strategic marketing initiatives to elevate visibility for programs in need of greater institutional grant funding



3

Essential Discussions About Grief in School Settings



In this workshop, attendees will learn why it is imperative for education professionals to address grief in school settings with youth, families, and educators. Research recognizes that when children process their emotions in a supportive school environment, the long-term impact of the loss is reduced and students have more opportunities to experience emotional well-being and protect emotional, social, and cognitive development. Attendees will gain a toolbox of resources and action steps to help their school understand that grief conversations can be an opportunity for children to express their emotions, receive support, and promote healthy growth and resilience.

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand the negative effects of experiencing a significant death loss during childhood, including the impact of profound stress, emotional pain, and adversity.
2. Learn how to raise awareness about the critical need for schools to provide resources, education, and a supportive environment for grieving children.
3. Identify specific actions and steps to invest in grief awareness at your school that are proactive in providing compassionate responses and fostering a culture of empathy for all, ensuring that grieving children receive the necessary emotional support to help them navigate their grief.




4

Welcome






5






Experiencing a significant death loss during childhood often results in **profound stress and adversity and, without appropriate support, can derail a child's development.**

We must invest in **awareness and prevention, to ensure a compassionate response** to all grieving children and promote healthy growth.

“Why This Matters”

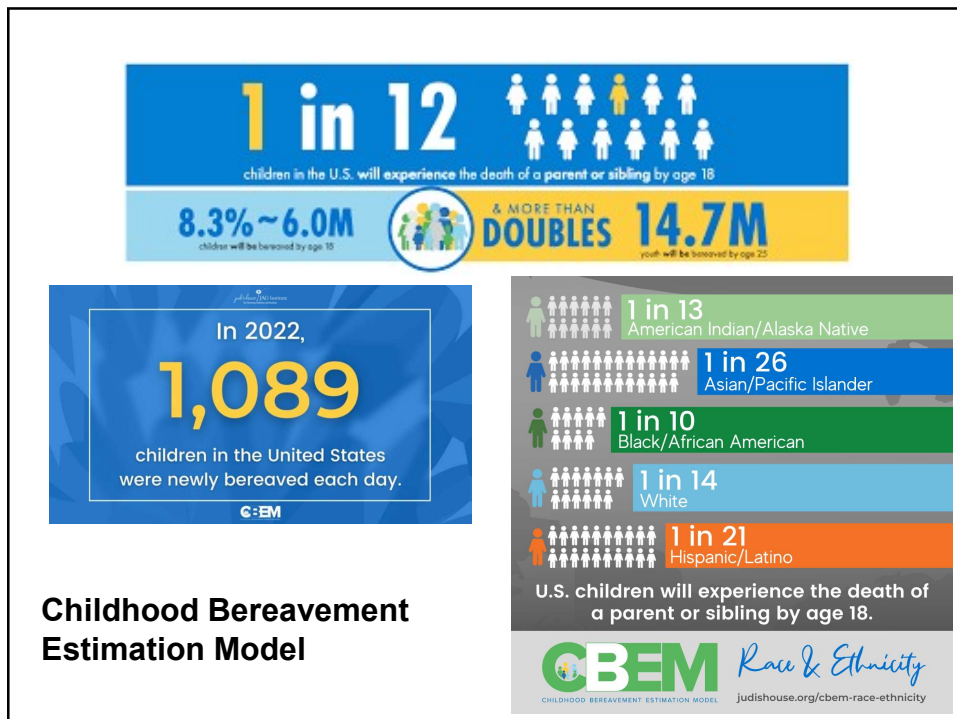
-  **1 in 12 children** will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18
-  **Grief impacts learning,** memory, attention, and behavior
-  **Students often suffer in silence** due to stigma or lack of awareness

“What Schools Can Do”

-  Train staff to recognize and respond to grief
-  Provide safe spaces for students to express their emotions
-  Integrate grief education into SEL or health curricula
- Connect students to counselors or outside resources


6

6



7

Grief Doesn't Have to Involve Death



GRIEF ISN'T JUST FOR DEATH

it's also for

- 1 FRIENDSHIPS THAT HAVE ENDED
- 2 LOSING YOUR COMMUNITY
- 3 MISSING THE CERTAINTY YOU ONCE HAD
- 4 QUESTIONING YOUR JUDGMENT
- 5 RELEASING WHO YOU ONCE WERE
- 6 FEELING LOST AND UNANCHORED
- 7 LOSING TRADITIONS YOU LOVED

End of Partnered Relationships/Divorce

- 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce.

Incarcerated Parents


- More than 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent. 1 in 28 children.

Immigration/Refugee

- there are seven types of grief in the migratory process: change in the family and loved ones; of the native language; of the culture; of the land; of the social status; of the contact with the group of belongingness and the risks to the physical integrity.

- Change in parental rights/custody
- Military Deployment
- Relocation
- Change in Routines
- Secondary Losses

8




The Paradox of Grief: Universal yet Individual

Grief is...

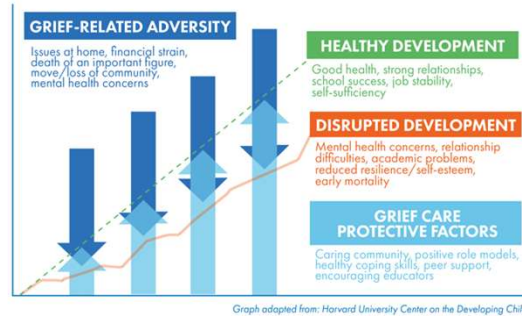
- A normal, expected and natural response to loss
- Not only an emotion; includes physical, behavioral, cognitive, social and spiritual reactions
- A meaningful attachment to someone or something that is broken
- Present during any time of change...even during our happiest moments

A life-long journey



9

Physiological and Long-Term Health Outcomes



Adults:

- Psychological, physical, social, developmental, spiritual, marital, financial challenges
- Decision regret
- High rates of depression and anxiety
- Sleep disturbances
- Marital disruptions
- Increased psychiatric hospitalizations
- Increased physician visits and health complications
- Work instability
- Even early death and increased mortality

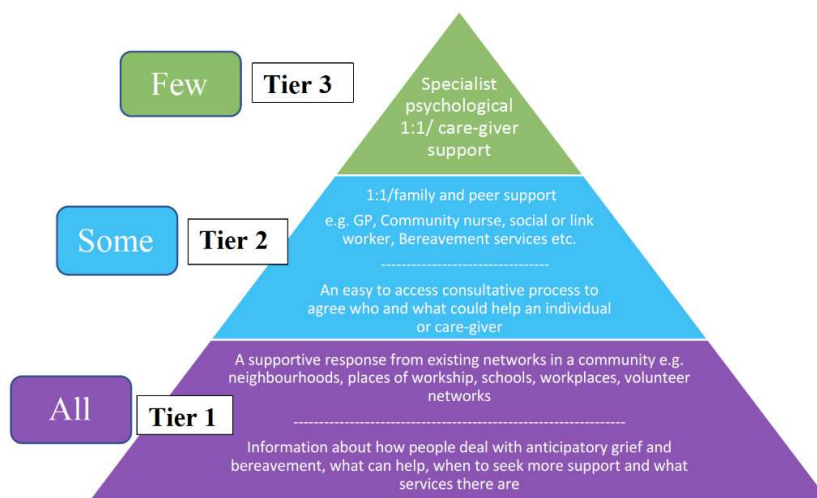
Children:

- Low self-esteem
- Increased depression and anxiety
- Increased use of alcohol and illicit drugs
- School avoidance
- Higher high school dropout rates, lower test scores and lower college attendance
- Increased suicidal ideation
- Increased physician visits and health complications
- Increased mortality rate (up to 71% in decades following the death of a sibling)



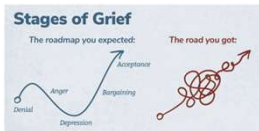
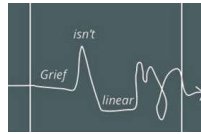
10

Model for Community Bereavement



11

Myths About Grief



THERE IS NOT A REASON FOR EVERYTHING. NOT EVERY LOSS CAN BE TRANSFORMED INTO SOMETHING USEFUL. THINGS HAPPEN THAT DO NOT HAVE A SILVER LINING. WE HAVE TO START TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT THIS KIND OF PAIN. ABOUT GRIEF, ABOUT LOVE, ABOUT LOSS.

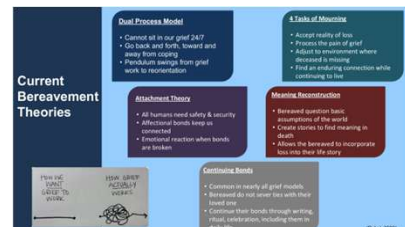
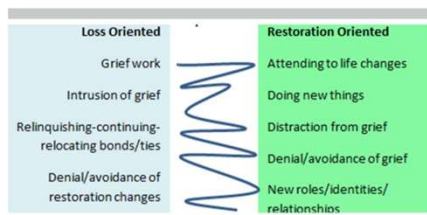
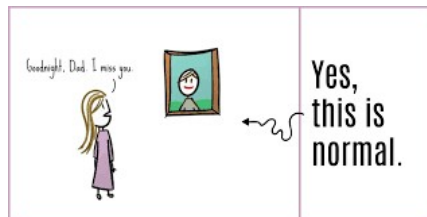
-MEGAN DEVINE



- Grief is linear (5+ stages are a fallacy)
- Grief is time limited
- Grief is a problem to be solved
- Time heals all wounds
- Grief is mostly sadness
- I just need to push past my grief
- Talking about the person who died will make things worse



12



13

Different Reactions and Coping Mechanisms

Individual Grieving Styles – Intuitive vs. Instrumental vs. Blended

Grief is a personal journey, and individuals may have varying styles of coping with their emotions, from open expression to silence.

Importance of Understanding

Recognizing that each person's grief is unique is essential for offering the right support and empathy during tough times.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms vary; some may involve talking with friends while others prefer solitude, art, or nature for healing.



Grieving Styles



Intuitive Grief

- Experienced as waves of emotion
- Expression mirrors inner feelings and emotions
- More feeling than thinking
- Focused on exploring and expressing feelings and processing emotions

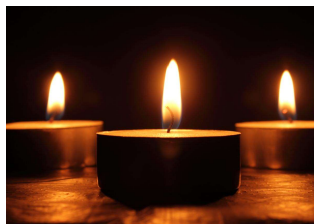
Instrumental Grief

- Experienced in more physical or cognitive ways
- Expression is more physical, cognitive or behavioural
- More thinking than feeling
- Focused on doing and more actively responding to grief

Based on work by Terry Real and Elizabeth Wain
www.duhgrief.com


14

Culture and tradition play an important role in the experience of grief



Traditions, rituals, and cultural practices may vary even amongst members of the same family/community (i.e. expression of grief, sharing private information, speaking the deceased person's name)

- Be conscious of assumptions regarding culture and traditions
- Approach the family with an open mind and heart
- Ask what support the family is open to:
 - Can you tell me how your family and your culture recognize and cope with the death of a family member?
 - Is this what you would like to see followed at this time? Can you help me understand how I can best be of help to you and your family?


 1
5

15

Types of Grief



Normal Grief

Including Inhibited Grief, Masked Grief and Delayed Grief



Complicated Grief

or prolonged grief characterized by long-lasting & severe emotional reactions.



Chronic Grief

Can last for years, often related to traumatic loss



Anticipatory Grief

Happens before the loss occurs often during a terminal illness



Secondary Loss

Occurs when the bereaved experiences additional losses.



Absent Grief

When the person is in total denial about their loss. Not able to admit they've experienced loss.



Cumulative Grief

Can result from multiple losses over a short time period.



Disenfranchised Loss

Occurs when society does not recognize or acknowledge the value of the loss.



Ambiguous Grief

Suffocated Grief

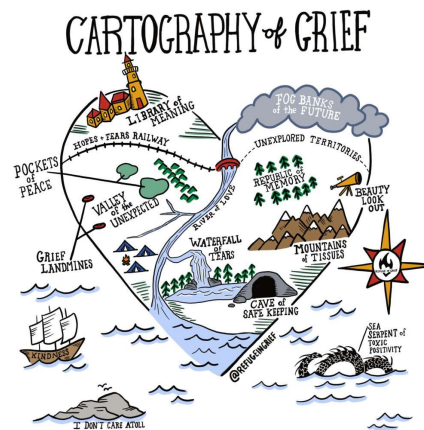


16

The Grief Experience Includes (but are Not Limited to):

WHOLE BODY/BEING EXPERIENCE

- **Emotions:** sadness, confusion, anger, and guilt
- **Mental Reactions:** forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, preoccupation with the loss
- **Physical Reactions:** Fatigue, difficulty sleeping, aches and pains, change in appetite
- **Spiritual Reactions:** May change worldview, challenge or strengthen beliefs, question purpose in life
- **Social Reactions:** Relationships may change, you may lose some connections and gain others



17

Grief Bursts

What is a grief burst?

 A flood of feelings

 Very sudden and intense

 Sometimes triggered by an occasion or sensory experience



- Can be activated by something big or small
- Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, places, other people
- Songs, items (car, piece of clothing, box of cereal, etc.) smells, a picture
- Picking up the phone to call or text them and realizing that you can't
- Crying when something wonderful happens because you can't share it with them



1
8

18

Cognitive and Developmental Effects

GRIEF RESPONSES VARY BY AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE

- 0-3** Irritability, clinginess, changes in sleep patterns or eating habits, crying, anxiety, temper tantrums, and difficulty soothing themselves
- 3-5** Irritability, bedwetting, temper tantrums, changes in sleep or eating patterns, separation anxiety, repetitive questions, headaches, or stomachaches
- 5-9** Nightmares, safety or abandonment worries, mood swings, repetitive questions, physical complaints, regression to younger behaviors
- 9-12** Anger or guilt (maybe more than sadness), withdrawal from others, acting out, worrying about further losses, curiosity about the death
- 13-18** Anger or guilt (maybe more than sadness), denial about death or feelings, isolation, changes in social behaviors or academic work, bodily stress



19

Emotional and Behavioral Effects

Acting Out or Withdrawal

Externalize their pain through anger, aggression, or risky behaviors, or may internalize it by becoming isolated or emotionally numb

Attachment and Relationship Issues

Can impact a child's ability to form secure attachments later in life, possibly leading to mistrust, dependency, or fear of abandonment

Substance Use and Risk-Taking

Adolescents in particular may use substances or dangerous behaviors as a way to cope or escape emotional pain.

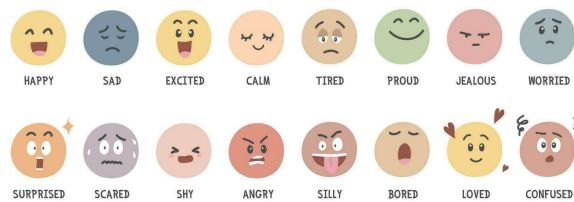


Emotional Dysregulation: Signs and Symptoms



20

IT IS OKAY TO FEEL



Psychological and Emotional Impacts:

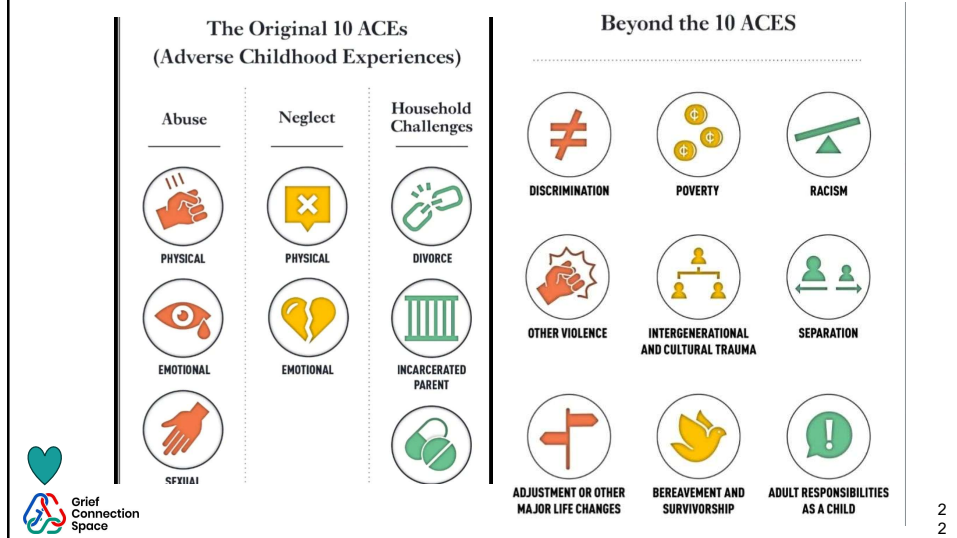
- Children may struggle to process the loss in a healthy way, leading to long-term grief that interferes with daily functioning.
- This can look like persistent sadness, longing, numbness, or difficulty accepting the death.
- Childhood bereavement significantly increases the risk of developing mood disorders.
- Anxiety may center around fears of further loss or insecurity, while depression may include low self-worth, hopelessness, or social withdrawal.
- Especially if the death was sudden, violent, or witnessed, children may develop PTSD-like symptoms (e.g., nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance).

2
1

21

Increased Vulnerability to Adversity

Children who lose a parent or guardian may face **socioeconomic instability**, changes in caregiving environments, or increased exposure to **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**—which compounds the trauma



22

Grief Humility

You will make mistakes.

Sometimes,

I don't know what to say

is the best thing you can say.

- Be humble
- Acknowledge mistakes
- It is our responsibility to educate ourselves, not the griever
- Grief is exhausting

"Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary."

Fred Rogers

Grief Advocacy:

Bringing grief into the foreground and embedding grief-informed practices into our professional work.

★

4/24/2025
23

23

There is a critical need for schools to provide resources, education, and a supportive environment for grieving children

Grief can have a serious impact on students but support from educators makes a difference:



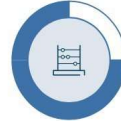
More than 2/3

of educators "always" or "usually" see withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, absenteeism, and a decrease in academic performance.



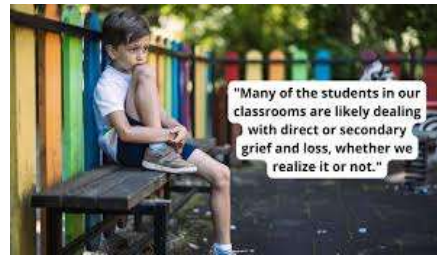
92%

of educators say childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools.



75%

of Americans agree that schools have a pivotal role to play in supporting grieving students.



24

24

Creating a Grief Informed School Community

- Assessment and Awareness
- Education and Training
- Create a Supportive Environment
- Develop and Implement Resources
- Engage the community
- Promote Mental Health Awareness
- Curriculum Integration
- Evaluate and Adapt
- Sustainability
- Model Grief-Informed Practices



25

Identify specific actions and steps to invest in grief awareness at your school

1

Have a plan created that outlines procedures and

2

Have a policy for memorials and memorialization

3

Have a team of people who are grief informed across the

4

Have resources ready to share

- Implement staff training on grief sensitivity and trauma-informed care (GSSI and personal development)
- Designate a grief support liaison or counselor in the school
- Establish clear protocols for when a student experiences a loss
- Provide grief resources to students and families (books, support groups, helplines)
- Celebrate a school-wide "Grief Awareness Week" to encourage empathy and understanding
- Include grief awareness in social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula

Schools need to be proactive in providing compassionate responses and fostering a culture of empathy for all



26

Grief in classrooms, "saying nothing says a lot"

-Dr. David Shoenfeld, National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement

What Students Need

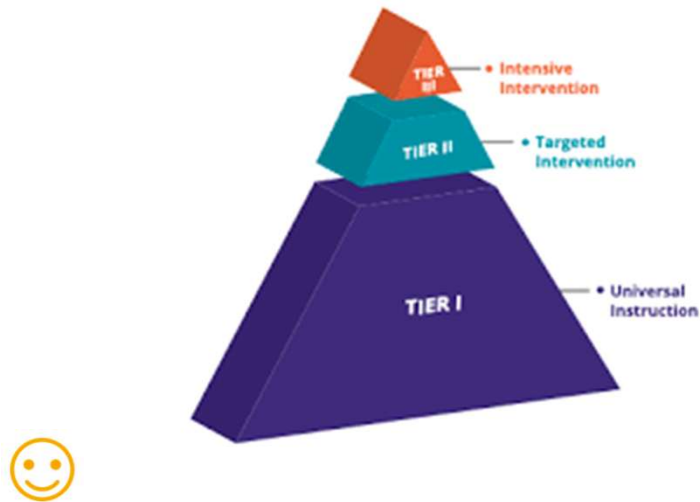
- A safe space to express emotions
 - Create supportive space
- Educators trained in grief sensitivity
 - GSSI and professional development
- Access to counselors and support groups
- An understanding that this is a long term process that will be part of the student's experience throughout school
- Peer understanding and inclusion
 - Embedded into curriculum and resources available



27

27

Take an inventory of the support and interventions that are implementable (now) and those that need to be created at all levels.



28

Grief as Part of the Curriculum

Cross-Disciplinary Approach

- Literature and Writing
- History and Social Studies

Dedicated Lessons

- Health and Wellness Education
- Science and Psychology

Art and Expression

- Art Projects
- Drama and Role-Playing

Guest Speakers and Workshops

- Invite Experts
- Peer-Led Discussions

Mindfulness and Coping Strategies

- Mindfulness Practices
- Coping Skills Curriculum:

Integration into Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

- SEL Curriculum.
- Reflection Activities

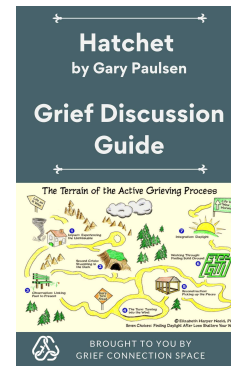


29

29

What to do in the classroom or at school

- Lean into your MTSS Frameworks
- Project Based Learning
 - Reading Guides
 - Grief Tool Kits
 - Stone of Strength
 - Thought Box
 - Worry/Concern Dolls
 - Listen if/when a child wants to talk.
- *Please note: We do not need to share our experiences to join with them.*



30

What can YOU do?

Raising Awareness

- Host community events and grief awareness days
- Partner with local organizations
- Share stories to humanize the issue
- Advocate for school policy changes

What Schools Can Do

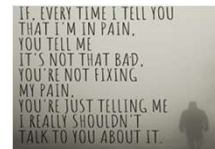
- Integrate grief education into teacher training
- Establish grief response protocols
- Provide ongoing mental health support
- Create student support teams

Your Role in Making a Difference

- Educators: Get trained and advocate for programs
- Parents: Talk to school leaders and support your child
- Community members: Support initiatives and funding

Call to Action

- Start the conversation at your local school
- Become a GSSI school
- Join or support organizations focused on grieving children

3
1

31

Opportunity to earn the designation as a Grief Sensitive School

- New York Life's Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative
- Partner with us in building a Grief-Sensitive School community
- New York Life has launched a groundbreaking program called the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative to better equip educators and other school personnel to support grieving students.
- Its Purpose:
 - Provide a personal introduction to this initiative through presentation given by the New York Life workforce
 - Raise awareness about the prevalence of childhood bereavement and 'grief in school'
 - Increase the knowledge of the resources available for schools to support grieving students and their families
 - Support schools/school districts in striving to become Grief-Sensitive through tangible resources, training, practical tools and a connection to a network of supportive services



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION



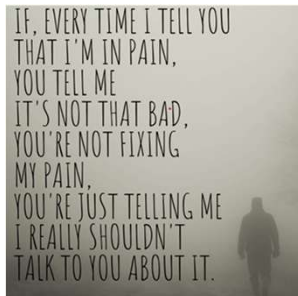
4/24/2025

32

32

Talking about Grief

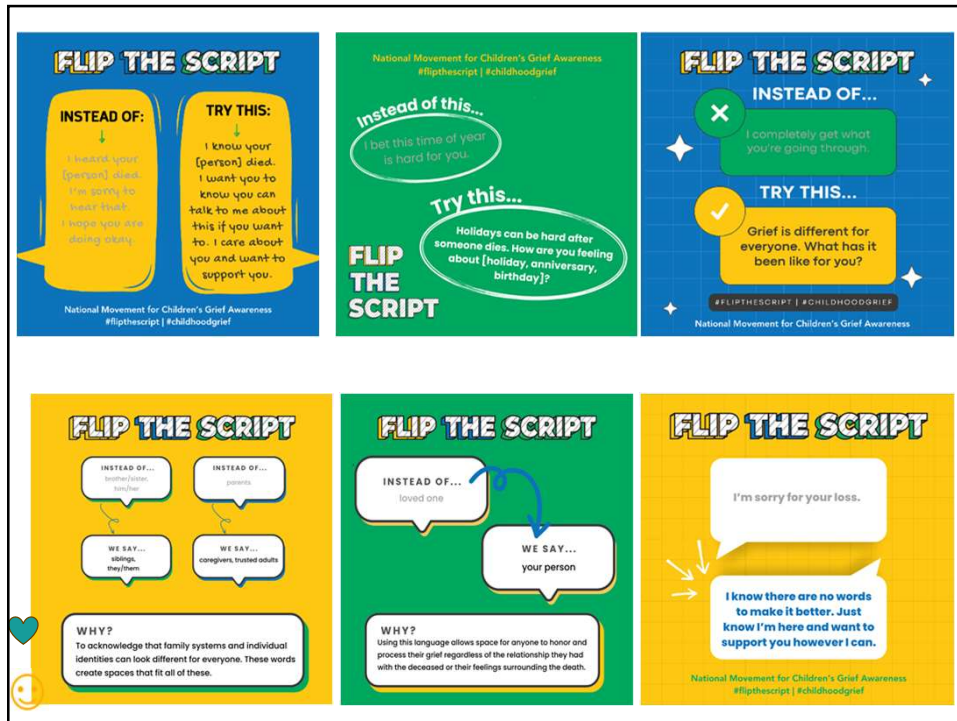
<https://nacg.org/flipthescript/#practice>



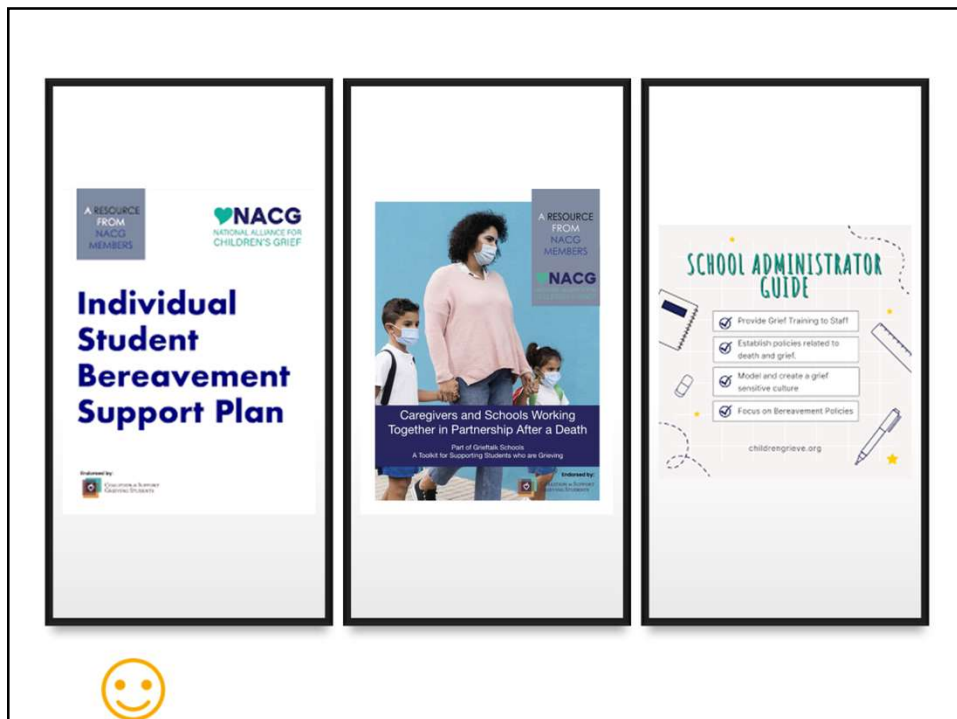
Be present.	Listen actively.	Actions speak louder than words.	Press pause on advice.
Get moving – grief is physical, not just emotional.	Cultivate a supportive environment for sharing.	Recognize the uniqueness of each person's grief.	Empower young people's voices.



33



34



35

Raising Awareness at School

- May – Mental Health Awareness Month
 - May 9, National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day
- August 30 National Grief Awareness Day
- September - Suicide Prevention Awareness Month
 - National Suicide Prevention Week (Sep. 6-12)
 - World Suicide Prevention Day Sep. 10
- November - Children's Grief Awareness Month
 - Children's Grief Awareness Day (Third Thursday of November)
 - International Survivor of Suicide Loss Day (Saturday before Thanksgiving)
- December – National Grief Awareness Week (First week of the month)



SUPPORTING A FRIEND WHO IS GRIEVING

Helpful for 6th -12th Grade

Grief impacts many different parts of a person. It can change our emotions, how we act, how we hang out with others, or even how our bodies feel. If a friend or someone in your class has experienced a death, it can be difficult to know how to support them. You might even be asking, "Do they want me to ask about their person?" It's important to remember no two losses are the same. While there is no "one size, fits all" way to support a friend, this guide will provide helpful reminders, compassionate language, and ways to give your friend space to share their grief.

This could HELP

H **BE HERE**
"We, no need to respond, just wanted to let you know the thinking of you, no needed to the game tonight if you want to join. No pressure either way. Let your friend know you are here for them, without any expectations."

E **EMPOWER**
"Do you want to talk, or would it be more helpful to just hang out right now?" Invite your friend to share what support they may need right now and know this may change as their grief changes."

L **LISTEN**
"You have any time to listen?" "I know there is an important day coming up and I've been thinking about you, I'm here if you want to talk." Take time to listen and really hear your friend. Let them know that you are ready to listen when they are ready to share in the days, months, and years ahead."

P **ASK PERMISSION** before sharing anything about your friend's loss.
"Thank you so much for trusting and sharing this with me. I want to share anything you said unless you only I would be helpful for me to give our friends a heads up."

This could HURT

H **HIDE or ignore them.**
"I don't know what to say to them, so I'm just not going to invite them."
"Show up for your friend, ask them to do normal activities. Understand they might not feel like joining you but continue to invite them."

U **UNDERVALUE their experience.**
"I know exactly what it's like to lose someone else. I completely get what you're going through."
"Please don't assume that you know what your friend's experience is like even if you had a similar loss."

R **BLAME - don't feel no blame.**
"I don't get it, you were the best friend, why are you off at a funeral about this again?" "Shouldn't you be over this by now? That happened a while ago!"
"Some days your friend may feel fine, some days they may be upset and other days they may be joking and laughing. There isn't always a rhyme or reason to grief."

T **TELL them how they should feel or what they should be doing.**
"You must be so angry at this."
"You must be so sad and really miss your person."
"You just need to keep their memory alive and think about what they would want for you. They wouldn't want you to be upset."

NACG
NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR CHILDREN'S GRIEF

Find support & resources on our website. 

www.nacg.org

36

- How is grief present in your life?
- How do you acknowledge your grief?
- What do you need to grieve?
- Are you holding others grief and if so, how are you releasing it into the world?
- What type(s) of grief have you/are you experiencing?
 - Ambiguous
 - Disenfranchised
 - Cumulative
 - Collective
 - Secondary Losses

Self-Reflection



37

Resources

Books and Journal Articles

- Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. Guilford Press.
- Kaplow, J. B., Layne, C. M., Pynoos, R. S., Cohen, J. A., & Lieberman, A. (2012). DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for bereavement-related disorders in children and adolescents: Developmental considerations. *Psychiatry*, 75(3), 242–265. <https://doi.org/10.1521/psyc.2012.75.3.243>
- Melhem, N. M., Porta, G., Shamseddeen, W., Payne, M. W., & Brent, D. A. (2011). Grief in children and adolescents bereaved by sudden parental death. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 68(9), 911–919. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.101>
- Brent, D. A., & Melhem, N. M. (2008). Familial transmission of suicidal behavior. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 31(2), 157–177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psc.2008.02.005>
- Dowdney, L. (2000). Childhood bereavement following parental death. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41(7), 819–830. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00670>

Organizations and Professional Resources

- Coalition to Support Grieving Students: <https://grievingstudents.org>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): <https://www.nctsn.org>
- Schonfeld, D. J., & Demaria, T. (2016). Supporting the grieving child and family. *Pediatrics*, 138(3), e20162147. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2147>
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. (n.d.). Children and grief: Guidance and support. <https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/children-and-grief-guidance-and-support>
- Judi's House/JAG Institute. (2023). Childhood bereavement estimation model (CBEM). <https://judishouse.org>

4/24/2025

3
8

38

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement: Responding To A Death



- Notification Templates
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/samples-templates/>
- Responding to a Death
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/guide-responding-death/>
- Responding to a Suicide
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/guide-responding-suicide/>
- Psychological First Aid for Students & Teachers
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/psychological-first-aid-students-teachers/>
- After A Student Death
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/after-a-student-has-died/>
- Student Commemoration
 - <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/commemoration/>

If your school is experiencing a crisis, please contact the Center now at
1-877-53-NCSCB (1-877-536-2722)
or helpnow@schoolcrisiscenter.org.



39

What if...

instead of avoiding grief,
we acknowledged it?



instead of shutting grief out,
we made space for it?

instead of waiting to be asked,
we offered concrete help?


What if we got better at grief?

SPEAKINGGRIEF.ORG

**ESSENTIAL
DISCUSSIONS
ABOUT GRIEF
IN SCHOOL
SETTING**

Grief
Connection
Space
GriefConnectionSpace.com



hello@GriefConnectionSpace.com

in f o d p
@GriefConnectionSpace