

# Appendix 11: Critical Incident Response

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## Critical Incident Response Team Contacts

<b>School:</b>	<b>Year:</b>
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Name of Member	Position	Phone	Alternate Phone
<b>Alternates</b>			

### COMMUNITY RESPONSE SUPPORT TEAM

Name	Phone
Alberta Health Services – Addictions and Mental Health	
Student's suicide prevention counsellor	
Regional services such as the Early Psychosis Intervention Clinics	
Other Community Program	

# Suggested Agenda for Initial Meeting of Critical Incidence Response Team

1. Assessing Information:
  - Confirm accuracy of information with family, police, district personnel
  - Determine what information is to be shared and a process for notifying staff, students, and parents (involve Area Assistant Superintendent and Manager of Communications in this process)
2. Assess the Impact:
  - Assess the impact of the incident on classes and individuals to determine who will need support.
  - Consider the impact on:
    - Teachers in other schools who may have taught the student or may know the teacher
    - Siblings in other schools
    - Anyone who may have experienced a significant death or may be facing one in the near future
    - Individual members of the response team
    - The ability of the team to function objectively
    - Note: Teachers' responses are impossible to predict. Sometimes teachers who did not know the deceased well react strongly because of other events or life circumstances.
3. Identify School Resources:
  - Are there other staff members who might be helpful in this situation?
  - Are there staff members who may require assistance in leading the classroom discussion?
  - Has the Safe School Coordinator been notified?
4. Cultural Implications:
  - What are the cultural or religious implications surrounding this incident or death?
  - How should they be addressed?
5. Community and School District Resources:
  - To what extent are other resources needed? (e.g. Aboriginal Support Workers, Multicultural Workers, Community Mental Health staff, School Police Liaison, Special Education Coordinators)
  - Is a consultant required to provide support and advice to the Response Team?
6. Confirm the overall strategy and the specific roles of response team members for this particular crisis. Involve the Area Assistant Superintendent and the Manager of Communications in this process.
7. Develop an agenda for the general staff meeting.

8. In consultation with the Manager of Communications, decide whether it would be helpful to send home a brief announcement about the incident. The Manager of Communications will work with the Principal to write this letter. Sample letters are included.
9. Recognize that this is a difficult time for administrators and try to build in supports for Response Team members.

# Media Guidelines for a Critical Incident

Rarely does a critical incident occur within a school/site without the media becoming interested. The degree of interest and variety of media involved usually depends on the nature of the critical incident and in some cases, its relation to current issues or events. Cooperation with the press is both desirable and necessary to make sure the incident gets told as accurately as possible.

The school-appointed Media Spokesperson is responsible for communicating with the media. In the event of a critical incident, all requests for information must be turned over to the Media Spokesperson.

In the case of a critical incident where media is expected:

- Inform the Administrator and Media Spokesperson
- Define the critical incident and have a good understanding of what happened.
- If possible, put together a fact sheet outlining details of the incident (per police direction).
- The Media Spokesperson will develop a media communication strategy and will communicate with media. Communication with the media may be encouraged to happen off of school grounds.
- Send all inquiries to the Media Spokesperson right away.
- Students may need to be reminded that they are under no obligation to speak to the media – off or on school grounds.
- Provide an area for reporters, separate from staff and students.
- Provide refreshments, telephones, tables and chairs as a courtesy (if the incident is prolonged).

Only those approved as a spokesperson will speak to the media. If selected as a spokesperson, when being interviewed by the media:

- Release only approved information, as per direction of the Media Spokesperson. Where the police are involved, or where there has been a serious injury or death of a student or staff member, the Media Spokesperson will confirm facts with the police and family before details are approved for release (ex: the name of the person involved.) The School does not wish to jeopardize an investigation by the police, nor does it wish to release information about a person without ensuring their family has been notified of the incident and they have given permission to do so. Another factor to consider is the Youth Criminal Justice Act, which prevents identification of any youth who has been charged with a crime.
- Speak only about matters that you are familiar with, pertain to the situation at the school/site and can be objectively verified.
- Have a statement prepared whenever possible. The Media Spokesperson will prepare this statement, which will be simple and will keep to the facts.
- It is appropriate to explain how the incident is being handled, express your sympathy and concern for the victim and family, and/or admit the staff and students have been greatly shaken up by the event.

- Work with the Media Spokesperson to think up and rehearse answers to the most difficult questions you could be asked.
- Take your time in answering. Don't be hurried into hasty responses, and don't keep talking to just fill in a silence or 'dead air'.
- Restate the essential points and do not rush the interview.
- Never say "no comment". Bad news cannot be hidden and will be reported whether or not you cooperate. Silence in the midst of a critical incident implies guilt, whether justified or not.
- Nothing is "off the record". Do not let a reporter's friendly, sympathetic manner disarm you into giving him/her additional information. Don't assume chatty comments are "off the record", even if you say they are.
- Avoid speculation as to the cause of the incident and allocation of blame. Filming,

Photographing and interviewing students:

The Administrator should provide direction to media personnel and control access to students when they are on school property. ***Never should a reporter, cameraperson or television crew be left on their own, while on school property.*** (When such access is denied, the media may instead conduct interviews just outside of the school grounds.)

## Initial Staff Notification

Staff can deal more effectively with a “crisis response day” if they’ve been notified of a death or crisis before they arrive at the school. As soon as the administrator in charge has made initial decisions relative to the need to organize adequate support and response, all school staff should be classed. This includes teachers as well as support staff.

### Things to keep in mind:

- With all parts of crisis planning and response, school staff should all be inserviced on this aspect at the beginning of each school year. The goal of staff notification should be familiar to them.
- Notification is best done by one or a small group of individuals who read a script, so the message doesn’t change over time.
- The notification of the crisis and the before-school meeting should be very brief. It should include primarily:
  - An initial statement that you have some sad (or tragic) news to relay.
  - Basic specifics about the event (who died, mode of death if known).
  - Ask the person to get paper and pen to write down what is said.
- Then cover:
  - That there will be a before-school meeting (indicate when, where, attendance is required, details of the death or crisis will be discussed further at that time)
  - Who will be coming to the school to lend a hand.
  - Reminder that it is not helpful to speculate or say anything which might cause rumours

### Communication with Support Staff:

For those who might be in contact with students prior to their arrival at school (especially the bus drivers) cover the following:

- Encourage kids not to speculate, dramatize or spread rumours. Let them know that teachers will have a special time to share details and talk about the impact of this death or crisis.
- If students are likely to have heard about the death prior to getting on the bus, consider having someone ride along with the driver to talk with students as they embark, particularly the bus that the deceased student rode to school. Save the front seat or two so that the person can ask kids to chat for a moment as they get on. Let them know that there will be a few moments at the beginning of the day when their teachers will talk to them about the event and that it isn’t helpful for students to speculate or spread rumours, that the teachers will clarify things when they get to school. Encourage them toward low-keying conversation in order to discourage rumours, drama, speculation. If there are students who seem upset, encourage them to sit close to the front, where the extra adult can be somewhat available to them.
- For those who cannot attend meetings or activities (such as bus drivers who will be transporting students at the time of meetings), have someone take notes and share information with them when it is possible. Be certain to look for means for these folks to be integrated into the process as much as possible and to help them identify what would be meaningful or helpful for them.



## Directions for Telephone Tree

Using a telephone tree to notify staff of crises is a less dependable means of sharing information. Although all have good intentions, it is so easy for information to take on the spin of the speaker. Rumours can begin before people even arrive at the school the next morning. If you decide to use this method, all staff should be inserviced on this and receive it as a handout in the fall of each year.

### Instructions:

When you receive a call about a school crisis, it will be important that you relay the information on to the next people on your list.

If the person following your name does not answer, call those following that name, so notification of all is facilitated. Take the responsibility of verifying that the person you could not reach is called repeatedly until contact is made.

The following is the essential information to be passed along, and the manner in which to do so:

- Begin by making one statement or preparation, such as, “I’m sorry to have to call with sad news.” This gives the receiver a minute to prepare for hearing something difficult. If you think this person is going to have an especially difficult time hearing the news, consider sharing information in person, or asking whether she/he is alone. Suggest that they sit down to hear bad news. Have them get a pen and paper to write down the message.
- Don’t drag it out, once you’ve given them the preparation statement, tell them the following:
  - That there has been a death involving a student (or staff, or other close person) from your school. Then tell who died, when and the mode of death, if known.
  - Tell the person of the before-school meeting, the time, and that more information will be shared at that meeting. Do not speculate, participate in rumours or enlarge. Remind that person that, as they call the people behind them on the telephone tree, they also need to adhere to the above outline.

The goal is to allow people to become emotionally prepared for the next day but to keep from starting or spreading any erroneous information. This is very important. Because of our need to know, details get distorted very innocently and easily. Please stick to the small number of facts and details given you as you proceed to make further calls.

## Sample Schedule for the First Day Response

7:00 am	Join staff for before-school meeting
8:00 am	Staff flood the hallways to welcome kids to school
8:30 am	Classes begin – teacher read announcements to students Safe room coordinator sets up safe room
8:45 am	Team members head to safe room as soon as it is appropriate to leave classrooms Safe room remains open, student come and go Two team members check-in on teachers and offer breaks as needed
Lunch	Team members provide support in staff lounge
Safe room continues the remainder of the afternoon	
3:00 pm	Staff meeting with the team
4:00 pm	Team debriefing
5:00 pm	Team leader and principal debrief and remind of the importance of self-care

# Before-School Staff Meeting

## Guidelines for the Before-School Staff Meeting

People to consider inviting:

- Safe school coordinator
- Support staff including bus drivers, cooks, custodians, aides, etc.

Prepare the meeting site: provide snacks, drinks and tissues

Structure of the meeting:

- The administrator should open and close the meeting to convey leadership, even if others are taking leadership of specific aspects of the response.
- Voice appreciation of the staff; acknowledge the difficulty of the days ahead and confidence in “our” meeting the situation with good will and integrity.
- Introduce any outside people such as counsellors.
- Review the facts of the death or crisis and any unique circumstances.
- Summarize the assignments and responsibilities of the staff and others.
- Go over specifics of safe room function and protocols
- Announce a staff safe room and that there are additional relief staff that can give breaks. These people will come around to classrooms to check if a break is needed or a break may be requested.

Talk about what teachers are expected to do:

- Share information with students or be in the room when someone else makes the announcement
- Discuss and validate the feelings and experiences people have or are likely to have.
- Allow and excuse students to the safe room.
- Expect confusion, crying and disruptive behaviour; try to be compassionate.
- Respect the wishes and privacy of the family as much as feasible.
- Keep a semblance of schedule but make accommodations around academics. Students may not be able to process information or follow directions well when they are in shock or grief.
- Discuss with students the potential impacts of the event and allow them to talk as needed (this may call for suspending the regular curriculum periodically).
- Ask for coverage for a class if you want a break or are feeling overwhelmed.
- Contact the office if you want support.
- Do not talk to the media but refer to the media spokesperson.

What teachers are not expected to do:

- Solve all problems, take the hurt away, become instant counsellors
- Hide their emotions and feelings

Allow ample time for staff to give information back to administration:

- Anticipate and ask what your staff needs.
- Ask what the school, counsellors and outside support can do to be of the most support.
- Ask for staff input, “What might we be forgetting? What don’t we know?”
- Allow time for thinking. Silence can be uncomfortable but often bears fruit.
- “What questions from students will be the most difficult to answer?”
- “What do you most dread about the day?”
- “What would you like for support that we have not yet identified?”

Before ending the meeting:

- Make tentative arrangements for a Life Tribute
- Give the time and place of the next meeting (after school)

## Sample Before-School Staff Meeting Agenda

1. Attendance –
  - Anyone who is not present should be informed of the critical incident as soon as possible following the meeting.
2. Provide as much accurate information as possible, including:
  - Names of the students or staff members directly involved
  - Time and place of the event
  - Any additional information surrounding the event, and
  - Names and grades of the siblings of those directly affected who are also in the school.
  - Only release approved information.
3. Introduce the School Team, members of the District Team, and any additional support staff or community resource people who are present and explain their roles.
4. Briefly review the school response plan. Provide extra copies.
  - Prepare teachers to deal effectively with informing their students of the critical incident.
    - Provide teachers with a written statement (prepared by the Manager of Communications) to read to their students. (See Appendix D, Page 26)
    - Give directions and model how students should be told.
    - Encourage teachers to allow time for classroom discussion.
    - Provide all staff with a copy of the protocol for class discussion. See page 9 and Appendix G, page 34 for guidelines on leading a classroom discussion.
  - Clarify procedures for handling students who want to leave the classroom.
    - Students who are highly emotional should be accompanied to the designated counselling centre.
    - Students who wish to leave the school should only be released to a parent, guardian or their designate.

- Inform teachers of counselling support plans.
  - Identify counselling staff that will run the counselling centre and the appropriate procedure for sending students to the centre.
  - Clarify the way to get counselling assistance for staff members.
  - Inform staff of any outside agencies involved in student or staff counselling.
- Ask staff to help identify students who may be at risk or need extra support.
  - Make counselling plans for all students who are potentially at risk for suicide or other serious emotional responses to the critical incident.
  - Direct staff to refer students who appear to be emotionally unstable to the counsellors.
- Review media policy (all inquiries sent to Manager of Communications).
- Inform all staff of any changes to the regular school schedule or cancellation of normal school events.

5. Set the date and time of a follow-up meeting.

- Assure staff that they will be kept informed of any relevant information in this update meeting.
- Follow up meeting will provide an opportunity for staff members to discuss classroom experiences and report information back to the group.

## Needs Assessment

This form is for staff to bring to attention those in the building who may need follow-up services by a counsellor or referred to outside resources after a death, tragedy or crisis.

Please indicate the names of people about whom you are concerned.

<b>Students:</b>	
<b>Staff:</b>	
<b>Family/Friends:</b>	
<b>Former Students:</b>	

What would be supportive for you or your class at this point?

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Other concerns?

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*Please return to the principal*

## Ways to Take Care of Yourself at Times of Loss (Staff)

- Spend time with family and friends. Talk with them about how you are feeling and doing.
- Spend time in prayer.
- Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal
- Write poetry
- Write letters of regrets and appreciations about anything in life
- Draw pictures. Get into art.
- Play a game or sport. Get lots of exercise.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Listen to upbeat music and dance.
- Snack on healthy foods.
- Enjoy a bubble bath.
- Care for your pets and house plants.
- Take a favourite stuffed animal to bed with you.
- Read a favourite story.
- Ask someone who loves you to read you a story.
- Let yourself cry.
- Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug!
- Get lots of sleep.
- Ask for a massage.
- Light a candle.
- Sigh aloud.
- Laugh. Rent a great, hilarious video.

## Signs that a Child May Need Professional Help

Any of these signs may initially be present in a person's grief...pay attention if these persist over time. If you are concerned about a child, talk with the school counsellor and his/her parents to see if they are seeing the same signs. Try not to overstate your case. It is helpful to have a list of resources for them, should they concur and wish to seek professional help.

<b>Physical Signs:</b>  changes in eating (less or more) changes in sleep (less or more) significant loss of energy nausea or stomach aches headaches somatic complaints	<b>Behavioural Signs:</b>  aggression, displays of power withdrawn, regression overachieving syndrome unable to speak of the deceased self-destructive excessive daydreaming compulsive care-giving accident-prone stealing or other illegal activities use/abuse of drugs or alcohol
<b>Emotional Signs:</b>  persistent anxiety desire to die clinging to others absence of all grief strong resistance to form new attachments	<b>Cognitive Signs:</b>  significant memory loss inability to concentrate confused or distorted thinking

## Announcement to Students

Announce the event in each classroom so that the teachers can get students focused and so that they have the opportunity to give immediate support to students. Teachers are better suited to manage this sensitive time with their students' best interests at heart.

Some teacher may want someone else to read the announcement in their rooms, and it is important to provide this support when requested. Teachers should remain in the room, so they are aware of how things unfold as well as the students' reactions.

The principal should take four concerns into account before informing the student body:

- a. When the announcement will be made (All students should be informed simultaneously regardless of specific method.)
  - b. Content of the announcement (see sample announcement below)
  - c. Method by which the announcement is to be made.
  - d. Reactions to the hearing of the tragedy.
1. Do not wait. To delay can give rise to rumour. Rumour can add another dimension to the existing problem. Delays can also prompt anger on the part of the students – a feeling that "no one really cares".
  2. Use of a classroom setting is most effective for the announcement. DO NOT USE SCHOOL ASSEMBLIES OR P.A. FOR ANNOUNCEMENTS.
  3. A straightforward sympathetic announcement of a loss with a simple statement of condolence is recommended. In case of suicide, respect the wishes of the family. Use some discretion regarding any details of the death. REMEMBER: Sometimes early information is not accurate. Be as truthful as possible when responding to the questions of students.
  4. After the announcement, allow sufficient time for students to begin to discuss their feelings in their classrooms. Remind them of counselling support. Assure students that they will be kept informed as information becomes available.
  5. Be prepared for inappropriate responses. Students who are uncomfortable or confused may respond by laughing, joking, or trivializing about a sad event. Remain calm and model appropriate behaviour.
  6. Discuss with students suggestions for appropriate expressions of grief (ex: cards, condolences to family, funeral or memorial service, remembrance book).

## SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENTS

Announcements of tragedy are like any other form of personal communication; they should be simple, straightforward, appropriate and unique. These samples can only give you a general idea. They are not "fill-in-the-blank" forms. Only you can give the personal touch that is needed at such a time.

### 1. After a suicide....

"I am sad to inform you that a tragedy has happened involving one of our students. \_\_\_\_\_, a Grade \_\_\_\_\_ student has died suddenly. (Parental/family permission needed to divulge reason.) It is important to respect the wishes and protect the privacy of family members. Details will be released in accordance with their wishes.

This kind of tragic news is hard to accept. You may experience many feelings within the next few days which is very normal. Each individual and each culture deals with loss differently. It is important to respect the way others grieve. Counsellors are available in room \_\_\_\_\_. Feel free to go and talk to the counsellors. They want to listen to your feelings and concerns.

A book of remembrance will be available for students' signatures in the counselling area. School Administration will be in contact with the \_\_\_\_\_ family to extend, on behalf of all of us, our sympathy, care and support."

### 2. After a known fatality.....

"I know that many of you may have already heard of the sad news, but I wanted to tell you myself. \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_ grade student was killed in an accident (or died in the hospital). The information I have is \_\_\_\_\_. You will be given definite information about funeral arrangements when they become available to us.

The tragic news of such a premature death is always hard to accept. It is particularly difficult for \_\_\_\_\_'s family and close friends. You may experience many feelings within the next few days. Each individual and each culture deals with loss differently. It is important to respect the way others grieve. Counsellors are available in room \_\_\_\_\_. Feel free to go and talk to the counsellors. They want to listen to your feelings and concerns.

A book of remembrance will be available for students' signatures in the counselling area. School Administration will be in contact with the \_\_\_\_\_ family to extend, on behalf of all of us, our sympathy, care and support."

### 3. After a known fatality.....

During the holiday we received tragic/sad news. We learned that one of our students, \_\_\_\_ was killed/died by \_\_\_\_\_. When things like this happen, people have different kinds of reactions, like shock, sadness, fear and anger. Those reactions may rise and fall throughout the day, and even for days to come. Some of us will want to have quiet time alone, and others may want time to talk with peers or adults. Some of you who didn't know \_\_\_\_ may be ready for your teachers to return to lessons sooner than others. We all just need to practice patience and have respect for each other.

We can take some time to talk about this today and in coming days. While some of you will be ready to return to class work, others may still wish time to talk or think about this. Students wanting to make cards for the family, talk with one another or needing more time alone to think and talk about the impacts of this tragedy may go to the \_\_\_\_ (safe room location) which has been set aside for that purpose. You'll have to sign out of class as you leave and sign in to the \_\_\_\_ as you arrive. It is important that all students be in some setting that has an adult present. For those of you who wish to talk one-on-one with the counsellor, (she/he) will be in his/her office and will see you during the day. To sign up for a visit with the counsellor \_\_\_\_\_.

The school day will remain on schedule, but teachers in any class may suspend regular classroom activities in order to allow you to talk about this event.

At this point, we know the following about the memorial or funeral arrangements... We will continue to keep you updated as we know more information. (Let them know how they'll receive the information)

### 4. At the time of the funeral.....

"We are taking this time to think about, a grade \_\_\_\_ student at \_\_\_\_\_ School who died last\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ 's funeral is being held right now at a funeral home in \_\_\_\_\_ and many adults and students from our school are there. A funeral is a special time to remember a person who has died.

When I finish speaking, we will have a time of silence to remember \_\_\_\_\_. If you did not know \_\_\_\_\_ well, here are some things his Grade \_\_\_\_ classmates wrote about him last week, after they had learned of his death. Many of the Grade \_\_\_\_ have known him since Kindergarten.

He was the kind of boy who was caring and helpful.

\_\_\_\_\_ wanted to be a \_\_\_\_\_ when he grew up.

\_\_\_\_\_ couldn't play outside but he was always happy. His smile never left his face.

He was very creative.

A lot of people loved him as a friend.

Take this time of silence to think of \_\_\_\_\_, to remember all the good things about him, and, finally, to say good-bye. In our silence we will send \_\_\_\_\_ our loving

thoughts."

5. After a fire in a school .....

"Last night a very frightening thing happened in our school. It was partially destroyed by fire.

Luckily, no was hurt in the fire. But schools mean more to people than just a building. We all have feelings about a school that go beyond the actual walls and roof – many hours of your school life have been spent here. You will have lots of memories connected with the building and you should not be surprised if you feel sad or angry about this happening.

The police and fire departments have informed us that they do not yet know how the fire started, but we will let you know any facts that are communicated to us as soon as possible."

**Lead some discussion time with some suggested openers:**

- Had any of you already heard about this before the announcement? How?
- Some of you have probably had other people in your life die... (let them talk if they want to)
- What do you think this may be like for the family?
- What kinds of things have people done for your family at times like this that helped?
- What might help us to feel better right now? What can I do for you today?
- If we were planning a Life Tribute for the school, what are some things you'd want said about \_?
- What are some of the ways we help each other get through times like this

**Read a story about loss and grief:**

What Happens When We Die (Carolyn Nystrom)

When I am With Jesus: For any Child with a Loved One in Heaven (Kimberly Rae & Phyllis Keels)

Someday Heaven (Larry Libby & Wayne McLoughlin)

What is Heaven Like? (Beverly Lewis)

Heaven God's Promise for Me (Anne Lotz & Laura Bryant)

Heaven for Kids (Randy Alcorn & Linda Washington)

Someone I Loved Died (Christine Harder Vangvald)

**Do some activities that help kids process grief and loss:**

Help Me say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies (Janis Silverman)

## Communication with Parents/Guardians

Parents will want information when a death has occurred in the school. Depending on the nature of the emergency, the entire community may be affected. Special communications to parents may be extremely helpful in gaining their support for the school and in reaching satisfactory closure to the critical incident.

### a. Guidelines for Parent Communications by Phone:

- i. Use active listening skills to calm an upset parent.
- ii. Contact the parents of any student who has had a difficult time coping with the death and give suggestions on how to offer support at home plus information on community mental health resources.
- iii. Reassure parents that the school is responding to the emergency and describe the response activity.

### b. Guidelines for Written Communication to the Parents:

Depending on the impact of the death, a letter may be sent home with every student in the class or classes involved and, in some cases with the entire school. This letter could include the following information:

- i. Information about the death that has occurred.
- ii. What the children have been told.
- iii. Grief reactions that the parents might expect to see in their children.
- iv. How to respond to their children.
- v. Funeral information.
- vi. Resources available to the parents.

Sample letters are included to generate ideas for parental communication.

The Safe School Coordinator will work with the Principal to formulate and implement the communication plan with parents and write a letter for parents. The Principal will send it home via email (and perhaps also send it home in hard copy form). The Principal will post the letter on all appropriate school websites. The Principal will also distribute the letter via traditional and social media if deemed appropriate.

## SAMPLE LETTERS TO PARENTS:

### 1. Dear Parent/Guardian:

We have suffered a tragedy at our school. On (date), (name of student) died suddenly and unexpectedly. (Student) will be remembered for his/her\_\_\_\_\_.

In addition to our grief over the loss of this member of our school community, we are sensitive to the fact that such an event has an impact on other students. In response, the school has implemented counselling services, which will give students an opportunity to talk about their thoughts and feelings with trained professional staff. We expect that some will seek out this help, while others may not. This is not intended to take the place of outside professional counselling.

Anticipating that your child may have a reaction to this event, resource information is available to you at your request by calling the school office at\_\_\_\_\_. If you should determine that your child needs further professional counselling, please contact Delta Hospice (604-948-0660).

Sincerely, Principal

### 2. Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of a Grade \_\_\_ student in our school. (Student) died from (ex: injuries suffered in a car accident), which occurred last evening (do not specify reason if death was by suicide or by causes which are unknown). (Student) will be remembered for his/her\_\_\_\_\_.

Students will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. A wide range of reactions is normal in the grief process and can vary from withdrawal, to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of\_\_\_\_\_.

Special counselling services have been made available to students today and will continue to be available throughout the week and longer, if needed.

If you think your child needs additional counselling support, please contact Delta Hospice (604- 948-0660).

Sincerely, Principal

3. Dear Parents,

For your information we have provided the following dates and times of services for \_\_\_\_\_:

Viewing Service Date  
Time

Funeral Service Date  
Time

Both services to take place at:

\_\_\_\_\_ Funeral Home  
Address

Should you wish for your child to attend the funeral service on \_\_\_\_\_, you will need to provide written permission. An adult should accompany children and young adolescents. Please feel free to call the school or funeral home if you require further information.

There may be a media presence at the funeral. Your child is under no obligation to speak to reporters. We suggest that you discuss this matter with your child and plan an appropriate response.

We appreciate the support and community feeling that has been evident these last few days. Thank you.

Sincerely, Principal

4. Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

We had sad news at our school today about the tragic deaths of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ was a grade \_\_\_\_\_ student at our school and \_\_\_\_\_ attended \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were \_\_\_\_\_ (killed and the suspect is in custody).

Our teachers announced the sad news in all the classes today and we had additional staff and counsellors to help students who needed more support. There was also an additional room staffed for students to go to if they needed a little extra time for expressing their grief with others.

The family funeral is at \_\_\_\_\_. Students who wish to attend will need to bring a note of permission from a parent. We will hold a Life Tribute on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Students will help with the planning.

(If there is something that parents are going to join in doing, such as a fundraiser to help the family, or organizing some effort on the family's behalf, give those details.)

If you have any questions, the school contact is \_\_\_\_\_.

Parents can support their children in grief by:

- Discussing with your child about their concerns or fears
- Be sensitive about whether she/he wants to talk
- Bring it up in case she/he is reluctant to do so
- Ask about his/her reactions and accept those feelings as stated. Resist the temptation to minimize the pain, deny the feelings or give advice. Simply listen and provide empathy! A helpful response may be:
  - “Tell me more about that.
  - “Have you ever felt that way before?”
  - “I wonder if there are other things that are worrying you?”
- Allow for regressive behaviours. Kids might need to sleep close to an adult for a while. Bedwetting, clinging to adults or other such behaviour is not uncommon.
- Be emotionally available a non-judgmental
- Realize that kids move in and out of the grief process, but it may be very intense for them at times when they’re experiencing the sadness, anxiety and fear. Encourage them to go out and have fun, be active and celebrate life. Those periods of reprieve are important in sustaining health and recovery.

## PARENT/GUARDIAN RESOURCE-SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN GRIEF/LOSS

### Helping Elementary School Youth Deal with Grief and Loss

Here are some things that parents/guardians can do to support children dealing with death.

#### CHECK FACTS:

- Give simple, accurate information about what happened. Tell only what you know to be confirmed.
- Do not allow children to watch media coverage of the death.
- Answer questions honestly, providing only as much detail as requested.
- Check out what has been heard about the death and correct any misinformation or rumours. "Tell me what you have heard . . ." is a good conversation opener. Be aware of the kind of information exchange happening through msn, chat lines, or social networking sites (Facebook, etc.).

#### CHECK FEELINGS:

- Ask your child how he/she is feeling.
- Tell him/her that feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, fear, relief are all common.
- Children will often feel responsible in some way for a death. They may believe that it is punishment for something they have done wrong. It is important to reassure them that this is not the case.
- Be aware that this kind of news and these strong feelings can lead to: nightmares, irritability, stomach aches, loss of appetite, and lack of interest in normal play activities. Your child may also cry more easily, be clingy and not want to be alone, wet the bed, or revert to immature behaviours. These are all common reactions under these circumstances and are usually temporary.

#### EMPOWER:

- Encourage your child to attend school.
- Invite your child to talk about the person who has died.
- Help your child identify what he/she has done in tough or sad situations before and how it has helped.
- Remind him/her that you know he/she is strong and has coped with difficult situations in the past.
- Facilitate opportunities for him/her to engage in coping activities such as: talking to friends or relatives, getting together with peers, writing in a journal, drawing a picture, going to a memorial service, making a memory book or collage, planting a flower or tree. Follow his/her lead.

#### MONITOR:

- For older children, monitor chat lines/msn/Facebook and other social networking sites use.
- Watch for signs that your child may need professional help to cope with this loss:
  - Normal living patterns do not resume over time.
  - A continuation of nightmares or need to talk about the death.
  - A continuation of feelings of insecurity and fear.
- Seek support from your Family Doctor, Hospice, or Child and Youth Mental Health, school or community counsellors.

**OTHER RESOURCES:** The Dougy Center- The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

<https://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/>

Remember that children are remarkably resilient. With love and support, they do recover from the very sad and tragic events that life can throw their way.

(Source: Greater Vancouver School District Emergency Preparedness Manual, 2016)

## PARENT/GUARDIAN RESOURCE-SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN GRIEF/LOSS

### Helping Middle School Youth Deal with Grief and Loss

Here are some things that parents/guardians can do to support youth dealing with death.

#### CHECK FACTS:

- Give accurate information about what happened. Tell only what you know to be confirmed.
- Limit viewing of media coverage of the death as repeated viewing may be traumatizing.
- Answer questions honestly, providing only as much detail as requested.
- Check out what has been heard about the death and correct any misinformation or rumours. "Tell me what you have heard . . ." is a good conversation opener. Be aware of the kind of information exchange happening through msn, chat lines, or social networking sites (Facebook, etc.).

#### CHECK FEELINGS:

- Ask your youth how he/she is feeling.
- Tell him/her that feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, fear, relief are all common.
- Be aware that this kind of news and these strong feelings can lead to: nightmares, irritability, stomach aches, loss of appetite, lack of interest in normal play activities, desire to be alone. Your youth may also exhibit a decline in school performance and an increase in acting out behaviours, including exaggerated emotional responses. These are all common reactions under these circumstances and are usually temporary.

#### EMPOWER:

- Encourage your youth to attend school.
- Invite your youth to talk about the person who has died.
- Help your youth identify what he/she has done in past tough or sad situations and how it has helped.
- Remind him/her that you know he/she is strong and has coped with difficult situations in the past.
- Facilitate opportunities for him/her to engage in healing activities such as: talking to friends or relatives, getting together with peers, writing in a journal or writing a poem, drawing or painting, participating in sports activities, going to a memorial service, making a memory book or collage, planting a flower or tree. Follow his/her lead.

#### MONITOR:

- Communication exchanges through msn, chat lines or social networking sites (Facebook, etc.).
- Participation in at-risk behaviours such as isolation, drug and alcohol use, violence, and delinquency.
- Watch for signs that your youth may need professional help to cope with this loss:
  - Normal living patterns do not resume over time.
  - A continuation of nightmares or need to talk about the death.
  - A continuation of feelings of insecurity and fear.
- Seek support from your Family Doctor, Hospice, or Child and Youth Mental Health, school or community counsellors.

#### OTHER RESOURCES: The Dougy Center- The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

<https://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/>

Remember that children are remarkably resilient. With love and support, they do recover from the very sad and tragic events that life can throw their way.

(Source: Greater Vancouver School District Emergency Preparedness Manual, 2016)

## PARENT/GUARDIAN RESOURCE-SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN GRIEF/LOSS

### Helping Secondary Youth Deal with Grief and Loss

Here are some things that parents/guardians can do to support youth dealing with death.

#### CHECK FACTS:

- Give accurate information about what happened. Tell only what you know to be confirmed.
- Answer questions honestly, providing only as much detail as requested.
- Be aware that repeated viewing of the media coverage of the death can be traumatizing.
- Check out what has been heard about the death and correct any misinformation or rumours. "Tell me what you have heard . . ." is a good conversation opener. Be aware of the kind of information exchange happening through msn, chat lines, or social networking sites (Facebook, etc.).

#### CHECK FEELINGS:

- Ask your youth how he/she is feeling.
- Tell him/her that feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, fear, relief are all common.
- Be aware that this kind of news and these strong feelings can lead to: nightmares, irritability, stomach aches, loss of appetite, lack of interest in normal activities, desire to be alone. Self-criticism, displaced anger, decline in school performance, and participation in at-risk behaviours may also occur. These are all common reactions under these circumstances and are usually temporary.

#### EMPOWER:

- Encourage your youth to attend school.
- Invite your youth to talk about the person that he/she has lost.
- Help your youth identify what he/she has done in tough or sad situations before and how it has helped.
- Remind him/her that you know he/she is strong and has coped with difficult situations in the past.
- Facilitate opportunities for him/her to engage in healing activities such as: talking to friends or relatives, getting together with peers, writing in a journal, drawing or painting, listening to music, participating in sports, going to a memorial service, making a memory book or collage, planting a flower or tree. Follow his/her lead.

#### MONITOR:

- Monitor chat line/msn/Facebook, etc. use.
- Monitor risk-taking behaviour such as use of alcohol and drugs, violence, delinquency, and self-harm.
- Watch for signs that your child may need professional help to cope with this loss:
  - Normal living patterns do not resume over time.
  - A continuation of nightmares or need to talk about the death.
  - A continuation of feelings of anxiety, insecurity and/or fear.
- Seek support from your Family Doctor, Hospice, or Child and Youth Mental Health, school or community counsellors.

**OTHER RESOURCES:** The Dougy Center- The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

<https://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/>

Remember that children are remarkably resilient. With love and support, they do recover from the very sad and tragic events that life can throw their way.

(Source: Greater Vancouver School District Emergency Preparedness Manual, 2016)

## Directory of Community Services

Add the community contact information for your local community

Contact	Number
Youth Help Line	
Kids Help Line	
Police Victim Services	
Alberta Health Services – Addictions and Mental Health	
Suicide Prevention and Support	
Grief Support e.g. Hospice Society	
Community Counselling Organization	
Community Counselling Organization	
Other Organization	
Other Organization	

## Suggested Format for Class Discussion

### Rationale:

School is a place where learning takes place, where it is safe to ask questions and obtain factual information. Adults frequently attempt to insulate children from the realities of death, but children have the capacity to cope with stronger feelings of loss than many of us realize. If children sense that parents and teachers are hiding something, their suspicions can lead to fears and fantasies that are more problematic for them than the truth. A teacher's expression of sorrow in class conveys to students that strong emotions are natural, and that mourning does not have to be hidden away. When students are allowed to grieve in a supervised setting with the comfort and reassurance of an adult, they will develop positive coping behaviour that will serve as a foundation for subsequent death-related situations. By sharing our feelings and experiences when confronted with death, we feel less helpless and alone.

### General Principles to Help Students of All Ages:

- a. It is important to acknowledge the reality of the critical incident and your willingness to talk about it.
- b. Be simple and straightforward. Discuss death or other tragedy in terms the child can easily understand.
- c. Give the minimum facts regarding the death in a concrete, clear and accurate manner. Share only the information that is public knowledge.
- d. Express your own feelings in an open, calm way, which encourages students to express their grief. Some bereaved students choose not to talk; discussion of the death strikes them as a source of more pain and some have a hard time verbalizing their feelings. These students should not be pressured to talk.
- e. Be sensitive to possible cultural and religious differences in methods of grieving.
- f. Project confidence and calmness. Be encouraging and reassuring.
- g. Listen, acknowledge the loss and have a non-judgmental attitude.
- h. Be patient. Many times, because of their need for reassurance, young children will repeat the same questions. Older children may repeatedly tell about the relationship and reconstruct the loss. Repetitions of this sort are part of the normal grieving process.
- i. Be prepared for any student(s) who may feel the need to discuss unpleasant features of the relationship. Anger or blame directed toward the deceased person or other persons is one of the many normal responses to loss. Students who may have had recent conflict with the deceased may be particularly affected.
- j. Assess the meaning of the loss for each child. Pay close attention to those children who have experienced other recent deaths or losses, or to those who have emotional problems.
- k. Expect regressive behaviours such as fear of dark, sleeping alone, nightmares, or being left alone. Expect physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches.
- l. Be aware that both children and adults find it natural to show their empathy during grieving through hugging or touching on the arm.
- m. Assess which students are in need of additional support and refer them to the designated counselling centre for individual assessment and counselling. Have someone accompany them there.

## The Class Discussion

**There is no right way to talk about death. The following statements are meant only as a guide.**

Words and phrases may have to be changed to better fit your students' needs. Please note that each classroom discussion will vary in length depending upon the age of the students and their emotional involvement with the deceased. Some discussions may be as brief as a few minutes, while others will continue for the entire class period.

### Beginning

1. Read the written statement provided by your Principal.
2. If, for some reason, you have not received a written statement to read, here is an example of what you might say:

"Something very sad has happened. (Name), a Grade\_\_\_\_\_student, has died (in the hospital, in a car accident, etc.). This kind of sad news is hard to accept. You will probably have many feelings in the next while. You could be sad, angry, confused, depressed, afraid, or have no feeling at all for some time. When I've felt like this, it has helped me to talk to someone. Sharing my feelings made it easier, although not less painful, to deal with the tragedy. If you'd like to talk about the situation, I'd be glad to take time to do that. I'll try to answer any questions as well as I can."

3. Encourage children to share memories of their classmate or teacher, "What are some of the things you want to remember about (Name)."

### Responding

1. Acknowledge that a wide variety of feelings is normal; there is no one right way to react to death. Feelings will vary from student to student and will change over time.

"It's okay to forget (Name) sometimes when you work and play."

"Some of you feel angry that (Name) died. What can you do with your angry feelings?" "It's okay that some of you are very sad and some only a little sad."

"Because (Name) died, you may be reminded of others that you cared for who have died."

"It's okay to cry - it's all right. It's also okay not to cry."

2. Acknowledge that you don't possess all the answers. Often there is more comfort from an honest, "I don't know why," than from an attempt at explanations that don't sound credible.
3. Acknowledge the various cultural or religious beliefs that may be expressed.

## Concluding

1. Focus on comforts and strengths students have:
  - The support that comes from sharing grief or fear with others
  - Counsellors at the schools
  - A support network (have each student think of someone he/she can go to for support)
  - Their individual strengths
2. Talk about the natural healing process. "Over time the pain of missing \_\_\_\_\_ won't hurt so much. That's the way it should be. It doesn't mean that you love \_\_\_\_\_ any less."
3. "Class is almost over and it seems there's more to talk about. Perhaps we can set aside some time tomorrow."
4. Give information about the designated counselling centre. "Designated counselling areas where you can go to talk about your feelings are available. The designated counselling centre will be located \_\_\_\_\_ for the next \_\_\_\_\_ days. You can use the designated counselling centre whenever you like. The people in the centre want to help you. They will listen to your feelings and concerns. They want to try to help you accept this loss."
5. It's helpful to channel the feelings of the class into appropriate expressions of concern. These expressions of grief may need to be cleared with the school principal or counsellor. It's comforting for students to feel a sense of usefulness. Students may want to:
  - Send personal sympathy notes (students may wish to make a card)
  - Make casseroles or do some baking
  - Provide babysitting or transportation
  - Go to the grocery store
  - Mow the lawn
  - Remembrance book
  - Discuss what else they can do to remember
  - If appropriate, students could be encouraged to select representatives to visit the family's home.

## Statements to Avoid:

1. Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away", "gone", or "sleep" which may confuse or frighten the child.
2. Avoid the general statement, "If you need anything, tell me...." It is better to say, "Would it help if I .....?"
3. Avoid saying, "I know just how you feel." It is more emphatic to say, "You must be having a lot of feelings right now...."
4. Avoid judging or blaming. i.e. "Kids do stupid things...."
5. Avoid frightening words such as 'murder' that may scare young kids. Instead use terms such as 'died'.

## Leading the Class Discussion in the Event of a Suicide

Most students over eight years of age are old enough to understand the suicidal act. Children and teens often have romantic fantasies about death which we do not want to encourage. The key here is to be truthful, but not to dwell on the details of how the student took his or her own life.

This type of sudden loss may bring with it a heavy overlay of guilt, shame, self-doubt and self-blame as well as strong feelings of anger, betrayal and rejection. Teachers should be prepared to encounter and validate these types of expressions. Bereavement and mourning can be more intense and extreme.

If the family has agreed that the death was a suicide, it is appropriate to use that term. If not, the class discussions will need to be conducted as a sudden death. The Principal will provide a written statement to read to your class to begin the discussion.

### What You May Say

1. "A very sad thing has happened. (Name), a Grade student has committed suicide. Details of the death will not be released to protect the privacy of his/her family. This kind of news is hard to accept. You will probably experience many feelings within the next while. You may feel sad, angry, confused, numb, depressed or even guilty. This was (Name's) choice and it is important to remember that he/she is responsible for making that choice."
2. "You are not responsible."
3. "This kind of death does not need to happen. Studies suggest that at the moment of suicide, individuals think death is the only way out. While this may seem to be the case, feelings and circumstances can and do change. Many people when they feel unhappy or unloved think about hurting themselves, but there are many better options. There are people who can help." You may want to remind students about the counselling centres that are currently operating in the school, as well as the on-going support that is available through the school counsellor, aboriginal support worker, multicultural worker or child care worker.
4. "Some people who commit suicide believe that people will care more about them after they are dead, than when they were alive. This is not the case."
5. "Do not believe everything you hear. You will hear many rumours and some misinformation. You can help others by not spreading rumours and gossip."
6. At the end of the discussion, help students understand the importance of talking to someone when they feel despondent. Elicit suggestions from the class as to whom they would talk to, and ask each individual student to privately think of those people to whom they would turn.
7. For younger children and pre-adolescents, it is important to confirm the fact that death by suicide is final and irreversible.

## Identifying and Supporting Students at Risk

Certain students may require individual attention. Students who are considered high risk need to be identified and offered help at the time of the incident. It may also be necessary to provide these individuals with counselling on an on-going basis. Check in with students who would be considered to be high-risk on a regular basis, particularly at high-risk times. High risk times include anniversaries of a previous death; birthdays, holidays, expected graduation date, etc. of the deceased student and the high risk student's own birthday.

The following descriptors are helpful in identifying a high-risk individual:

- Participated in any way with a suicide or accident.
- Knew of suicide attempt or potential attempt and did not try to stop it.
- Feels guilty about things they said or did to the deceased prior to the death.
- Had recently punished or threatened to punish the deceased for some misdeed; did not take a suicide threat seriously, or had been too busy to talk to a victim who asked for help.
- Were relatives, best friends, self-appointed therapists or those mentioned in a suicidal note?
- Identifies with the victim's situation, has a history of suicidal threats or attempts, or is desperate and now considers suicide a viable alternative.

### SUICIDE RISK FACTORS

Following a suicide or a sudden death, students may be more vulnerable to suicide attempts, especially those who had a particular relationship with the deceased (those who had a romantic relationship, had a fight, knew about the plans for suicide, etc.) or because of their proximity to the deceased ("discovered" the body). Below are some examples of reactions that can suggest potential suicidal behaviour:

- An excessive grief response,
- An extreme change in behaviour,
- Statements that indicate a student wants to join the deceased,
- Statements that indicate a suicide pact has been made, "I have to join him," or "I promised to do something,"
- Previous suicide attempts, and/or
- Other recent major losses, such as a divorce in the family, the break-up of a romantic relationship, or a move to a new community and the accompanied loneliness.

## After-School Staff Meeting

- Give staff a chance to unload, decompress and let off steam
  - What happened for you today? What reactions/thoughts/feelings occurred for you?
  - What kinds of reactions have you witnessed, as well as experienced?
  - What parts of the day worked well? What could be improved?
  - How could you have felt more supported during the day?
  - What could we do to provide support to you right now?
  - What additional resources do we need in the near future?
- Catch them up on details from the day.
- Give them updates of plans for funeral arrangements, if known.
- Determine the next day's plan and ask staff what their needs are for support and otherwise.
- Review any relevant emergency plan if appropriate and needed.
- Review responsibility of staff. Provide handouts if appropriate. Possibly go over signs of depression, difference in sadness and depression. A counsellor may cover this portion of the meeting.
- Make a list of students for whom staff members have concern and describe the referral process. This list can be generated anonymously or as a group.
- Remind all school staff to keep an eye on at-risk students and report concerns to the counsellors.
- Remind them of support services and tell them to take care of themselves, as well as students. Hand out "Ways to Take Care of Yourself"
- Share your appreciation of things that went well and recognize the efforts of others. Give time for others to do the same.

# Handling a Class When a Student or Staff Member Dies

## Guidelines for leading a class through a loss:

- Gather together to read the announcement provided by administrators
- After the announcement, ask what they know. The discussion might include:
  - “How many of you already heard about \_\_\_\_’s death before you got to school today? What did you hear? Bring the discussion back to the facts.
  - “This is what we’ve been told by (the police).” (clarifying facts)
- Allow for time to discuss reactions. “We all have lots of different reactions and feelings at times like this. What are some of yours? Maybe some of you are thinking about others in your lives who have died.”
- Give details of funeral arrangements, school plans)
- Allow more discussion and perhaps ask what we might do for the family.
- “Sometimes kids want to write letters or make cards or write poems. Would any of you like to do something like that?”
- Some kids are emotionally more impacted by death than others, and that this is a time for everybody to practice respect and responsibility, and that this is a time to practice empathy.
- Let students know that there is a room set up (give location) if they would like a separate space to write letters or cards and that they can ask to go there.

## Suggestions:

- Be a role model for expression of feelings. Share your own reactions with the class.
- Let children talk, write or draw about their feelings.
- Listen to what students have to say and give verified age appropriate, honest information.
- Don’t force a “regular day” upon grieving students, but at the same time, don’t allow the class to be unstructured. Offer choices such as writing letters, journals, discussion of other losses, or participation in appropriate physical activities.
- Allow students to write personal sympathy notes or pictures. These will be given to staff for screening and distribution, as appropriate.
- Plan more active expressions of concern for older students.
- Explain how students should treat a bereaved student or staff person who is returning to school. Emphasize that trying to avoid them, or being overly helpful will not help. Point out the need to resume normal relationships.
- Remember that your class may remain quiet and down for some time afterwards (perhaps even a month) and that some students may begin to act out noisily and physically as a way of affirming that they are still alive.
- Ask your school’s counsellors to assist planning ways to help students and staff.

**Students and staff may experience all the stages of grief, plus:**

- Panic, confusion, helplessness
- A sense of overwhelming responsibility for the well-being of students and staff in this time of grief
- Unresolved feelings about past deaths or loss in their personal lives
- Unresolved feelings about issues that are specific to families involved
- Concern on the part of administration or others about how to deal with this event with the least negative reaction from parents
- Fear of a general panic in the student body if we deal with this at all. In reality, our fears are greatest when we feel isolated or feel that information has been withheld or are left to cope in isolation with unspoken fears. This is especially true for students.
- A need to keep fear or emotions all “under control” to keep themselves safe from their own fears and discomfort.
- The struggle of wanting to make it all okay.
- Feelings of being unprepared, inadequate, unable to function.
- Empty, frozen feeling
- Preoccupied, distracted or spaced out.
- Compulsive, not able to let go of activity details.

# Supporting Youth in Grief

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 use the safe room 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 to go to the safe room and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving 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.
- An opportunity to say “good-bye”.
- 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 is fine.
- Support their thoughts and feelings.
- Expectation of appropriate behaviour.
- Continued structure
- Stable environment with predictable schedule

## Critical Incident Stress Debriefing for Staff

After a critical incident, the school arranges for members of staff to come to a debriefing session. Critical incidents can affect people to such a degree that they find it difficult to carry on with their regular duties. The purpose of the session is to give people an opportunity to talk about the impact of the incident on them. In addition, it gives people an opportunity to listen to the experiences of others and provide support when necessary.

Debriefing takes place in a small group, usually 6-8 people, and is conducted by trained Critical Incident Stress Debriefers, usually counsellors. Debriefing takes approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Debriefing is not therapy or counselling. It is specifically related to one event and is aimed at helping a school return to normal after a difficult incident. In a debriefing session, all participants are encouraged to talk about the emotional impact of the incident and are given information about what to expect in the aftermath of such an event. As people listen to each other and share, they are often better able to process traumatic events.

People who participate in debriefings often comment afterwards that the debriefing helped them to deal with the feelings of shock, anger, sadness and confusion that often attend such an incident. Sometimes people comment that they didn't think they needed a debriefing, but they came anyway and were glad that they did.

# Creating School Life Tribute

## Purpose of the Life Tribute

The function of a school remembrance activity or Life Tribute is to benefit the students. It pays tribute to a life and is one of the tasks of grief. It brings closure to the formal period of grief and makes a statement that “we’re in a community” The family may be invited to attend, but it is suggested that they not be involved in the program end of it. Family members have the opportunity to make their statements about the child at the funeral they plan. The parent may say something that is confusing or difficult for some students. The school activity is the time when peers have that opportunity, and it is also the students’ gift to the family.

In most cases, all students should attend, for a variety of reasons. It makes a clear statement that when any one of you dies, we in this community take notice. It is also a statement of unity and an opportunity to learn empathy. All should know what to expect ahead of time. This is about prevention and improving school climate, about instilling a sense of respect at a time when it is authentic and real. If there is no space large enough for the entire student body to gather, consider having all students in two or three grade levels closest to the deceased attend.

The need of the student body is to have a brief, formal period of grieving – three or four days, and then right after the timing of the family’s funeral, to have their own moment of closure

## Format of the Life Tribute

A life tribute is often held within the week after the funeral. The tone might be nicely set by having the principal begin the activity by making statements that every student and staff person is a part of the school community and that when any one of you dies, we notice and take pause to commemorate this person and acknowledge our loss.

The focus and content should be uplifting, celebrating the positives in the person’s life, hopeful, acknowledging the sadness, yet looking optimistically toward the future. It can be the service or a more informal gathering with a specific activity for students. The goal is remembrance of the deceased and providing a clear transition time bringing to a close the formal period of grief the school has supported, after which things should begin to return back to “normal.”

A sense of “ownership” in the planning of the activity will increase its efficacy with the students. As much as possible, it should be planned by and meaningful to the students, with adult supervision to be certain all that is going to be said/done has been previously cleared. It is easy for students to get overly dramatic or inappropriate in other ways at times like this. Students create the message, but staff reads all the scripts and students agree to script only messages.

- Part of the content of the activity should be directed at instilling the memory of the student in a positive way in the context of the student body and school’s history (e.g. statements such as “Although she is no longer with us each day, we in the choir will always think of her when we sing \_\_\_\_\_, her favorite song”.) Note ways the student brought humour, creativity, or anything else to the school.
- It may be helpful to make a statement that this gives us reason to pause and reflect as we consider how important friendships are and how precious life is...It is also a nice time for the principal to

talk about how each student is valued and important...to encourage kids to take care of themselves...take care of each other... those kinds of things.

- If there is a way to relate this death into a context of meaning (we have a hope of life in heaven), it is helpful to do so – and this is a time to relate the person’s life into a context of meaning, noting the gifts we received by knowing him or her.
- It is helpful to have a standard format or agenda that is always followed. Have variations to commemorate the uniqueness of each one who dies so that the statement the school makes about a popular student is not significantly greater than the statement made for another child. If the number in attendance or the significance of activity is greatly different, that reinforces to less popular kids that they don’t matter as much.
- The cards that were made by the students may be presented to the family. Staff should review all the cards to ensure that the content is appropriate.
- If there has been a Support Room open earlier in the week, consider having someone available to open that room up for awhile after the Life Tribute. For some students, the Life Tribute will be the first time they’ve really broken through their own denial, disbelief or shock about the death of this friend. For others, the Life Tribute will awaken profound grief of past deaths or losses.

#### **Materials or props may be helpful**

- e.g. include an 8x10 picture of the student with some personal memorabilia on a table (such as volleyball, sports equipment, musical instruments, other items representing the deceased’s interests), balloons and candles (which are about life, hope and celebration) or things that the students have made for this occasion.

#### **Timeline for the Life Tribute**

- Have the activity after the family funeral but during the same school week, if possible. That way, the activity marks the end of the school’s grieving process. If it is before the family funeral, those students who plan to go to the funeral do not make the shift back towards normalcy because they’re still anticipating the sadness of the funeral. Having it before a weekend gives students the chance to come back to the next week with a fresh start.
- Have it early in the day, so students have time back in “regular” classroom activities before leaving for home. That way, if some students need to talk more to counsellors or peers, they’re not being shuffled out to go home, where for some, there may be no parent.
- Keep it fairly brief (perhaps 20-30 minutes)

#### **Goals of the Life Tribute**

- To meet the needs of kids processing grief
- To provide a time when respect is expected from all students toward those who knew the deceased, no matter that student’s popularity.
- To improve school climate by using that respect to reinforce that all students are worthy, and are a part of the school community.
- To facilitate the processes of grief:
  - To give truthful answers about the reality of the death.

- To pay tribute to the life and celebrate the deceased's gifts.
- To acknowledge the loss and to "normalize" the difficult aspects of grief.
- To give opportunities for sharing memories (but not open mic)
- To give the death meaning in the context of life.
- To give closure to the formal period of grief.

### **Life Tribute Agenda Suggestions:**

#### **Set-up**

It adds a nice touch to have music playing as students enter and leave the activity. The space most often used is the gym or auditorium, but this depends upon the chosen activity. Students should have been told what to expect prior to coming in. If students have made murals or other expressions of their grief, these can be displayed, perhaps behind the podium.

Near the podium is a table with a picture of the deceased student (8 x 10 or larger) with a tall candle in one of the school's colours next to it. The table also holds other items of memorabilia representing the student's life. At the back of the table may be a large candle in another school colour (this may burn for many hours so 3 or 4 inches in diameter and quite tall. This may be used for every Life Tribute over several years).

A special section of front row seating is marked off for the family of the deceased, should they be coming. Extended family members and friends of the family are also welcome. They are invited to attend, but not to speak as part of this service/activity.

#### **Messages to Convey**

- "This is a sad time. We are a community, and when any one of us dies, we stop and take note and pay tribute."
- "Times such as these are times to contemplate the bigger picture – the meaning of life and our faith, the preciousness of friendships, the importance of treating each other with respect and caring. Although it is difficult to be with each other in times of pain, it is much better than being alone in our grief. These kinds of times are when we build character, when we build inner strength when we learn about compassion. I'm glad each of you is here."
- "This is a time to acknowledge the life and death of \_\_\_\_." At this point, \_\_\_\_'s friend(s) lights the candle that is next to \_\_\_\_'s picture on the table that holds memorabilia representing this student. The large candle remains unlit.
- Next, some statements are made by the principal about the student.
- Peers and friends then read poems or statements they've written, all of which have been screened by a school staff person.
- The school choir may sing a special song about the importance of friends.
- If the student belonged to activity groups, someone from each activity might share a perspective of that student's contribution.
- If the student was a member of a musical group, that group might perform the deceased/s favourite song or one which is meaningful.
- The school counsellor or a staff member takes a moment of appreciation for how kids have supported one another during the week and how she/he wants to remind all that this is a great time to continue to take care of themselves and one another.



- After all of the presentations have been given, the principal again takes the lectern. She/he states that \_\_\_\_ has contributed to a part of the collective essence of \_\_\_\_ School and that those contributions will always be a part of the \_\_\_\_'s legacy. As she/he says this, the friend uses the light from the candle to light the big candle, which represents the collective student body. Then, the principal's message, as she/he looks over to the student's picture, is "\_\_\_\_, we loved you, we'll miss you, good-bye." As she/he says goodbye, the student's friend blows out the light of the smaller candle, and walks over to give it to the student's parent(s) or family member. If no family is present, the principal states that \_\_\_\_ will be taking the candle to the family, along with a message of how meaningful the school Life tribute was in celebrating this student's life and representing this student's contributions.
- In dismissing students, the principal states that: "The "hospitality" room is open, that the family will be there for awhile and would welcome the opportunity to visit with students who knew \_\_\_\_\_. The \_\_\_\_ room (Safe room) is open for awhile for any students who need to talk or reflect a bit more before returning to class. I appreciate the mature behaviour students have displayed both at the activity and during this difficult past few days as well."
- Teachers will escort the students from the assembly as per normal procedures and may be excused to go to the hospitality room or safe room after notifying their teacher. "Please do not gather in the commons, bathrooms, locker rooms or other unsupervised places."

# Shrines and Memorials

## Shrines

The creation of “shrines”, special places of remembrance and “ribbon campaigns” have become a recurring phenomenon in recent years. In the case of a sudden death, shrines almost always occur. These shrines may be very valuable in assisting individuals to give a public display of their grief. There are some predictable locations where shrines form:

- The site of the death
- The student’s locker or desk
- A location special to either the staff member or student or his/her peer or family group

Often there is a very real need to create a shrine and it will be impossible to stop the creation of one. It is especially important for the Critical Incident Response Team to be proactive and use their wisdom and knowledge to modify either the type or location of a shrine. It is also important to involve students, at the secondary level, in making decisions about shrines and memorials.

### Considerations specific to “shrine” creation:

- The location of the shrine should be a place that will not impede the regular operation of the school/site, as it struggles to return to normalcy.
- Once a location for a shrine has been decided, staff should be vigilant to ensure that other “unauthorized” shrines are not created. Should individuals wish to place articles in an unauthorized location they should be re-directed, in a sensitive and caring fashion, to the authorized location and articles moved there as soon as possible.
- The material and nature of the shrine should be temporary and no permanent or semi-permanent materials should be used (e.g. have students/staff write their messages of condolence on a large sheet of paper.)
- **A plan for removing the shrine must be in place and communicated to all staff and students before the shrine is created.** When a special location is set up, staff and students should be informed that this will be the special place until the funeral/memorial service (or some other set time) and then after that time all articles will be given to the family. Shrines that are too long in place may cause secondary traumatization.

### Considerations specific to ribbon campaigns:

- Will it be considered disloyal for an individual not to wear a ribbon?
- How long will the campaign last and how will it end?
- Will the campaign assist the school in moving on or will the campaign serve to keep people stuck in their grief?

## Memorials

The suggestion of creating some sort of memorial is often directed to a Critical Incident Response Team upon the death of a student or staff member. Often, with a desire to express solidarity with the deceased's family, schools/sites agree to the family's request to create a memorial. In many cases, after the school/site has agreed to a memorial, problems begin to surface.

Financial memorials such as funding of charities seem to offer a more positive alternative than physical memorials, scholarships and bursaries. Fund-raising options (ex: for a hospital or recreation centre) offer the opportunity to demonstrate caring for the deceased while at the same time permitting the community to move forward. If there are bursaries and scholarships offered, there may need to be an agreement to retire them after 5 years or to limit the number of years in which there is a public presentation of these scholarships.

Before agreeing to assist in the creation of any memorial, the Critical Incident Response Team should have a clearly defined policy regarding who will receive a memorial and who will not. For instance, does the method of death or the degree of contribution to school life enter the equation? What are appropriate memorials for students who have committed suicide?

Examples of memorials that have become problematic include:

- a. Dedicating an entire annual to one deceased individual may appear to be a very honouring thing to do for a particular individual. However, such action may:
  - Overshadow other important events that happened that year
  - Disenfranchise those students who did not know the deceased but nonetheless went to the school and participated in school life and want their memories in the annual
  - Over-emphasize the deceased's importance in school activities that year
  - Leave the school vulnerable if another student/staff member dies in the same year, or if a precedent is established for future years.
  - Unintentionally make the death of another student or staff member seem unimportant

It may be more appropriate to dedicate one page rather than an entire annual to a student/staff member.

- b. Physical memorials such as:
  - Plaques on playground equipment
  - Plaques on walls in school/site
  - Memorial trees/gardens

In general, physical memorials are rarely successful when placed on school/site property. While memorials can be a solace to loved ones, they can prevent people from “moving on” and often can present a daily reminder of the death of the individual. Physical memorials also offer opportunity for vandalism and this vandalism becomes especially hurtful to the loved ones.

It is not recommended that a school/site re-name a room or other location, or erect a permanent monument in honour of the deceased without careful consideration and consultation with District senior management.

It is important to remember that students are members of a broader community and there may be community sites that would be more appropriate for memorials.

c. Scholarships and bursaries and awards:

In cases where multiple tragedies have occurred over time, scholarships, bursaries and awards presented to commemorate students who have died have the potential to overshadow the achievements of the recipient.

## The Funeral

In the case of a death, inform staff and students of plans for funeral arrangements. The school will need to provide information to the entire school community about formal occasions such as funerals or memorial services.

A funeral is a leave-taking ritual, which in some cultures is a way of acknowledging our relationship to the deceased. There is general agreement among researchers that going to a funeral can be a positive experience, a way of saying good-bye. However, students should not be pressured into attending

1. When appropriate, students and staff should have the opportunity to attend the funeral.
2. Decisions about allowing funeral attendance should be governed by the wishes of the family. Student and staff attendance at the funeral can provide support for the family if that is the family's choice. Students should be informed of the family's wishes regarding attendance at the funeral service.
3. The funeral service can help peers understand and accept the death of a friend or colleague and can help to provide closure.
4. It is possible to take any school aged child to a funeral if the child is accompanied by a parent or familiar adult, feels secure, and is prepared in advance for what will take place.

Ensure that students who plan to attend the funeral are prepared by helping them anticipate what happens at funerals. Explain the purpose of various rituals, appropriate etiquette at the ceremony, and other topics as necessary, such as embalming, cremation, open caskets, burial and specific cultural practices.

For example: "We have funerals so that people can say good-bye. Some people may be crying. Often a religious leader and a few other people talk about special memories and say special prayers."

5. Young children may not be able to sit for the entire service. The adult in charge should try to maintain a close physical presence to reassure the child and answer questions. Sufficient adults need to be available to accompany any children who wish to leave early.
6. If the funeral is likely to attract media coverage, it may be necessary to prepare staff, students and parents so they will be able to respond appropriately.

## In Case of a Completed Suicide

In most cases the school is informed first and will contact and inform the community agencies of a completed suicide. Administrators or school counselors will contact community agencies for assistance.

If a completed suicide occurs on the weekend or during a school holiday, school administrators and managers of community and government support agencies will contact each other by phone to plan an appropriate response.

**In all cases**, the person answering the call will be asked to locate the appropriate person to whom this information will be passed. This ensures that someone will receive the information directly, and messages/voice mail are not used. From there, the appropriate staff in each agency/service can be informed so that they are aware of an increased risk for other youth.

### Coordinating Service Response to Completed Suicides

#### First Day

Family and Community Services or other agencies will be invited to attend the school meeting to:

- Obtain the factual information
- Identify groups/individuals that are vulnerable for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), including staff
- Offer CISD to staff at the end of the week
- Offer additional grieving support
- Provide additional resources if necessary to conduct Suicide Risk Assessments

Victim Services and Family and Community Services or other community agency's role will be to:

- Share information with the school regarding resources and help make connections with youth groups, church groups, Hospice
- Provide Prevention cards and other handouts to the school

School counselors can then let families or other vulnerable students know about what resources are available.

Designated space for grieving students and/or staff will be monitored by school counselors.

## Second to Third Day

### Suicide Prevention Team:

- Is prepared to respond to contacts from schools, students, and community
- Will begin a coordinated effort between Child and Youth Crisis Program and Family and Community Services or other community agencies and the school counsellors to facilitate CISD groups, taking the lead from the school,
- Will be available for suicide risk assessments
- Will inform other groups of resource availability (ex: non-school youth, Hospice, or faith-based leaders)
- Will assist with parent information sessions, if requested by the school

## Fourth to Fifth Day

### Suicide Prevention Team:

- Will staff CISD groups, if requested by the school
- Will participate in the Team Review with the school
- Will assist in evaluation of further needs, possible need for support of individuals or groups around the funeral(s)

Family and Community Services or other community agency Managers will be responsible for sharing information regarding community response plans such as services available, defusings, or who to call for specific issues. This will include services in all settings so that service providers can encourage appropriate youth, children, or others to attend. The contact list will be the same as above.

Any service provider can call the Child and Youth Crisis Program to discuss youth's service needs or to develop a joint response plan. Where possible, the Child and Youth Crisis Program will offer their expertise, support, and assistance.

## Helping Youth Deal with Suicide

Dealing with suicide can be complex for youth and the parents supporting him/her. Here are some things that can help:

### CHECK FACTS:

- Give accurate information about what happened. Tell only what you know to be confirmed. If it has been confirmed as a suicide, speak of it as such. Avoid guessing about the cause of the suicide. Particularly avoid linking the cause to teenage fads or fringe groups (such as goth culture).
- Answer questions honestly, providing only as much detail as requested.
- Check out what has been heard about the death and correct any misinformation or rumours. "Tell me what you have heard . . ." is a good conversation opener. Because peers may be looking for someone to blame for the suicide to help them make sense of what happened, it is critical to stick to the facts.

### CHECK FEELINGS:

- Ask your youth how he/she is feeling and accept what they have to say.
- Remind him/her that feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, fear are all normal.
- Guilt can be a particularly powerful feeling in relation to the suicide as youth often assume that there was something that they could have done to prevent it. This is reinforced by the fact that the friend may have talked about wanting to take his/her own life prior to the death. Let your youth talk about these feelings freely and help him/her to understand that he/she is not at fault. No one person can cause or prevent a suicide. It is usually a decision made after a long, complex journey.
- Be aware that this kind of news and these strong feelings can lead to: nightmares, irritability, stomach aches, loss of appetite, lack of interest in normal activities, desire to be alone. Self-criticism, displaced anger, decline in school performance, and participation in at-risk or acting out behaviours such as exaggerated emotional responses may also occur. These are all common reactions under these circumstances and are usually temporary.

### EMPOWER:

- Invite your youth to talk about the friend that he/she has lost.
- Talk about suicide openly. Remember that it is complicated and that we rarely know all of the factors involved. It may be viewed as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It is a "thinking" error.
- Talk about things that your youth already does when facing a tough situation.
- Remind your youth that you know he/she is strong and has coped with difficult situations in the past and that there are people and resources to support him/her through this.
- Facilitate opportunities for him/her to engage in healing activities: talking to friends or relatives, getting together with peers, writing in a journal, writing a poem, listening to music, drawing or painting, playing sports, going to a memorial service, making a memory book or collage, planting a flower or tree. Follow his/her lead.

**MONITOR:**

- Participation in risk-taking behaviour such as use of alcohol and drugs, violence, delinquency, driving recklessly, and self-harm.
- Watch for signs that your child may need professional help to cope with this loss:
  - Normal living patterns do not resume over time
  - A continuation of nightmares or need to talk about the death
  - Persistent thoughts or talk of suicide.
  - A continuation of feelings of insecurity and fear
- Seek support from your Family Doctor, Living and Learning through Loss, Child and Youth Mental Health, Project Alive, or school or community counsellors.

## Dealing with Terrorism, War and Other Traumatic Events

Terrorism, war and threats of both around the world are often unsettling for staff and students. Television exposes children and youth to haunting and frightening pictures of destruction and death and gives rise to insecurities and fear. Sensitive handling of these situations can alleviate some of the stress for students and staff.

Extraordinary events may require an extraordinary response. Here are some general guidelines to follow in the wake of global traumatic events:

1. Call your school critical incident response team together and assess the impact of the event on your school. How affected is your school community? Does the school need an acknowledgment of the event or can you carry on without some kind of intervention?
2. Be honest with yourself and acknowledge your own feelings of shock, disbelief, anger or fear.
3. If your team decides there needs to be some acknowledgement of the event, prepare a written statement that staff can read out to students if they wish. Give teachers suggestions in leading a class discussion. At the elementary level, teachers might offer opportunities for students to use art, puppets or other means to communicate their feelings. At secondary, teachers may wish to lead discussions, giving students an opportunity to express feelings and build a sense of community.

Music can also be therapeutic at such times. Remember that children will experience fear and anxiety and a loss of control. Re-assure them that these feelings are normal, under the circumstances.

4. Let students know about counselling arrangements.
5. Ask staff to take particular note of students or other staff who may be at-risk and to let you know who they are.
6. Communicate with parents, as you think necessary.
7. Consult the other sections of this Critical Incident Response Protocol that may be relevant to the situation.
8. Try to keep school as normal as possible. Children and youth can be so inundated by the images of terrorism and war that school routines can offer a relief from the frightening news reports.
9. If there is a racist component to the event, be prepared to defuse and educate students in order to diminish the impact of racism on your school.

What teachers and parents can do to assist students in case of threats of terrorism and war:

- Do not dismiss or minimize children's questions or feelings. Reinforce that their feelings are a normal reaction to the abnormal situation. (Ex: "I can understand you are feeling – *scared, worried, depressed* – Many people feel like you.")
- Help children separate real, factual information from imagined fears.
- Help children differentiate between war and terrorism. Explain that the war is happening overseas.
- Children and youth need to know they are safe. Concerning terrorism, reassure your children that you are there to protect them and the government is doing everything possible to ensure the safety of all citizens.
- Keep hope alive. Encourage children to talk about positive events in the past and think of what things they can do to make the world a better and safer place in the future.
- Help children express their thoughts and feelings about current events in concrete ways (ex: conversations, art/drawings, journal writing).
- Speak truthfully to children. In response to their questions, give them clear and age-appropriate information about the current world situation. Use simple language and less detail with young children.
- For younger children, try to limit exposure to media discussions of current events and monitor their use of the internet.
- If you are unsure of an answer or how to respond, be honest. Simply say, "I don't know" or "I feel that way too".
- Explain, in children's language, the rise of ethnic tensions and teach acceptance and respectfulness of other cultures.
- Try to maintain normal routines and consistency.
- Do not convey your worst fears to children.
- Above all, **listen, listen, listen.**

# Murder

*This addresses the murder of a student that occurs off school grounds.*

Murder brings about fear on many levels for the students. If the perpetrator hasn't been caught, the fear is "Will I be next?" If the perpetrator has been caught, the fear might be, "Could someone I love turn crazy and murder me or someone else?" Murder strips kids of a feeling of safety that has likely been a given in their lives prior to now. It assaults their naivete and flies in the face of a beloved childhood innocence. Students may be feeling guilt, thinking, "It should have been me. She/he was a better student or a better friend or whatever than I am."

## Issues to address:

- Safety and security – students need practical and realistic reassurance about their safety both at school and in the world
- Consider the need for someone trained in trauma to help assess needs.
- Find out whether students are having nightmares or difficulty concentrating because their thoughts seem obsessed with the event.
- If students need trauma debriefings, bring in someone trained in interventions specific to children and victims, not critical incident stress management.
- Consider the use of possible support people/resources:
  - Team members most familiar with trauma
  - Police can clarify facts for kids, bringing a sense of security that all that can be done is being done.
  - Bring in support rather than expecting too much of the building counsellor
  - Consider the use of people from mental health teams and other community members.

The central reassurance students need is that very few people get to a place that is so extreme that they commit murder, that this was a very unusual occurrence. This is especially important if the perpetrator was the child's parent or a family member. If that is so, many children who have experienced physical abuse in their homes may be agitated and anxious. They need to know what resources for them are at the school. To whom can these children talk if they are worried that their parents are capable of such a thing?

It is helpful to suggest to teachers that if one of their students is acting out or agitated beyond what is normal for that child, realize that the agitation and acting out are possibly a cover for or an attempt to manage the fear that this may happen to him/her. Look for solid resources to help these students work this through, helping them separate out what is just fear and what is passed on possibility and reality. Help them identify their network of support. Whom can they call when something in life seems out of control? Consider involving Mental Health workers or others who have expertise in child abuse.

# Setting up a Support Room

## Who is in charge in the Support Room?

- A Support Room coordinator is designated to direct the Support Room. It is helpful to have familiar faces.
- Need about a 1:10 adult to student ratio
- Provide name tags for Support Room staff

## Purpose of the Support Room:

- Students benefit from putting words to their grief and having support to grief.
- The Support Room is for all students and not only those who are struggling with the current loss, but who may also be triggered because of a previous loss (e.g. those who have lost a sibling or parent)
- Providing a Support Room facilitates a return to normalcy in the classroom.
- Creating a safe environment to grieve. Grief needs a witness and kids need a chance to share their grief and have an adult who can tolerate being with their pain.
- Providing adults who feel safe to the kids. Loving adults make a big difference.
- To help kids grieve well and to facilitate recovery
- To get kids who are not coping or who are acting out, out of the classroom
- It is not for parents, but there may be a separate Support Room set up for parents if needed. Parents' fears and grief may be overwhelming for kids.
- Have a separate Support Room for staff

## Success depends upon

- Managing behaviour (no "loose cannons"). If a child is triggered, he/she may need heavy body work to get the adrenalin out (eg. Bilateral movements such as walking, rocking in a rocking chair, cross arms and tap opposite side of the body, stationary bike)
- Hearing the truth - clear information and honest answers when possible
- Putting word to their grief and fears (e.g. stories)
- Giving meaning to their grief (e.g. recalling memories). The brain needs to make sense of what happened before it starts healing.
- Anxiety reducing environment, people and activities
- Being with other kids who are grieving
- Transitioning kids back to class when ready
- Meeting the needs of the students (e.g. listening, space, activities)
- Having activities that have meaning
- Having help available quickly
- Counsellor is available in a separate space for one-on-one counselling with more extreme needs

### **Who may want to come in the Support Room?**

- Anyone may come (no gate-keeping). The length of stay is determined by the need. It is not just for friends of the deceased.
- Kids in shock.
- Kids crying about things.
- Kid's that have other issues (e.g. experienced loss, abuse, suicidal). Kids who are reliving previous trauma may find it hard to be near grief (may need their own space).
- Kids who are "spinning out."
- Kids who are curious.

### **Kids who may need extra attention**

- Those in the child's class(es)
- Close friends
- Those doing extra-curricular activities with the child
- Those who saw him/her recently
- Kids who have experienced loss or abuse and those who have had suicidal ideation.

### **Guidelines for running the Support Room:**

- Greet kids in the hall and sign them in before they come in the room. Check with those leaving to make sure they are doing okay and invite them to check in later if they like.
- Ask them what brought them into the room
- Remember you don't have to have all the answers. The most important gift you have to offer is your willingness to be present and listen. When talking to students:
  - Listen – to what they are saying
  - Observe - "It looks to me like you're..."
  - Validate – "It makes sense to me that you feel/think that."
  - Reflect – "If that happened to me I might feel/think"
- Listen more than you speak. This is not therapy but a crisis response.
- Listen for kids who seem to feel the need to do something. Invite them to help plan the Life tribute.
- Allow students to choose the length of the Support Room stay. Some students may be there to support their friends.
- Stick to the facts and do rumour control
- Keep a list of students who exhibit more extreme emotion or withdrawal and those who may need follow-up services. Offer an opportunity to visit with a counsellor if they wish.
- Encourage students to remain in the Support Room or be in their classrooms or another area supervised by an adult. If they want to go home, see if a phone call to a parent would help them make it through the day at school. Sometimes it helps if a parent comes to the school to be with their child for a time, but if none of these methods work, then follow school procedures for check-out home. Grief is best processed in the environment of the loss, so it can be helpful for them to stay at school.
- Ensure Support Room staff get breaks

## Questions to ask students:

### Introductory Questions

- I'm glad you came in. How did you know \_\_\_\_? Did you know \_\_\_\_ or are you feeling sad about something else? \_\_\_\_? What will you miss most?
- What are some of your favourite memories of
- What brought you in?
- Observations – I noticed ... What's that about?
- What have you heard about what happened?

### Closing questions

- What's the hardest part about this right now?
- What are your greatest concerns/fears?
- Who is your support system?
- If you wake up in the night and feel scared, could you wake your parents?
- Is there anything we could do that we haven't thought of?

## Activities:

- Makes cards/messages for the family (e.g. attach cards to a banner)
- Art, drawing, colouring (the brain has a hard time being anxious and doing art)
- Quiet games
- Listening to soothing music
- Eating snacks, drinking
- Refer to *Support Room Activities* and *Support Room Supplies* handouts

## Follow-up

- Hold an after-school meeting. Identify students who are at risk.
- Allow a time to decompress and "clear out" before Support Room staff go home.
- Ask the Support Room staff some of the following questions:
  - What are some observations you have about the Support Room?
  - How was it for you personally and emotionally?
  - What feelings are you having right now?
  - How would you like to be supported right now?
  - What aspects of the Support Room worked well?
  - What parts could be improved?
  - How could you have felt more supported during the day, both physically and emotionally?
  - Provide the handout *Self-care*

# Support Room Sign in Sheet

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name	Class	Time In	Time Leave

## Support Room Supplies:

Sign-in Sheet

List of activities children can do

Paper, card stock, envelopes, crayons, felts, stickers

Colouring pages, adult colouring books

Games: puzzles, cards, Lego or other quiet games

Sparkle tubes and modelling clay, mars mud, sand tray (sensory)

Calming music, candles, candle lighter, flowers or plants

Positive words/picture posters

Kleenex

Banner paper for writing a message for the parent(s) or sibling(s)

Stuffed Animals

Juice boxes, water, granola bars (no nuts), sugar-free candy, gum

## Activities for Processing Grief and Loss

The activities are appropriate directly after a death or tragedy. This could be used in a Support Room or in the classroom.

1. Here is a picture of how sometimes it hurts to live through something
2. When someone dies.... (picture, words)
3. What I most appreciate about \_\_\_\_ was...
4. My favourite memory of \_\_\_\_...
5. Here is a list of feelings I have \_\_\_\_\_. And here is where I hold those feelings in my body... (write on outline of a body).
6. Letters of appreciation or regret. This is an opportunity for youth and staff to process their “unfinished business” by getting clear about anything that is fostering feelings of guilt as well as helping them begin to get in touch with the wonderful things that they will miss about the deceased.
7. Cards and letters to the family. This is a wonderful way for youth and staff to share their sympathy with the family. Encourage them to share a happy memory about the deceased either in words or by drawing a picture. Or suggest that they share the attributes they most appreciated. At times, students may depict the event in graphic detail as a way to come to terms with the death. These would not be something to share with others but give the student positive reinforcement for confronting this for themselves. Then, gently encourage the student to think of a second theme for the family. The student might wish to take their first picture home to share with parents, and if this is so, it would be helpful for someone to give the parents a call to explain the context of the card or drawing.
8. Reading stories about death and loss.
9. Clay or play dough. Some kids need time to let their minds wander while the shock is wearing off. Having something for their hands to do keeps them in one place and still gives the mind freedom to let things sink in.
10. Art supplies and poster paper. Kids may want to make a giant poster that expresses their loss. This is something a whole group can do.
11. Planning the Life Tribute. Planning this event can take place in or out of the Support Room environment. Whether it is coordinated by one person or a committee, students need to be informed and involved in planning the Life Tribute.

12. Invite specific people in to talk with students. Sometimes it may be helpful to have a nurse or paramedic familiar with a critical event come in to describe material facts about death or to help dispel rumours.
13. Drawing favourite memories of the person. This internalizes that the love we have for the deceased doesn't have to die. We have the memories forever.
14. Bucket of Tears and using analogies appropriate to the developmental age of the kids. "Every time someone dies it is as though we have a bucket of tears inside us. Draw yourself and the bucket inside you. How high up is the level of the tears?" This can be followed with a conversation about what helps us empty out the bucket – that there are always a few tears left even years later, which is what gives us empathy, but can be very easy to manage when we've cried most of our tears. OR: "If we could do all of our grieving on a special island, what would that island have on it? Draw your boat on the journey to the island."
15. Create a "question wall". Students write their life questions on paper and place them on a specially designated wall. As each question is discussed in a group, put the next one up on the wall. Questions might include; What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of death? What happens when we die? How does God see death? Why do we die? Why is there pain and suffering? Why do some of us die young? Is there meaning to the cycle of life and dying? The question wall works well for older students who have more existential questions.
16. Grief haiku. Read a couple of haiku and talk briefly about the style of haiku – just a collection of words which flow together, all relating to a central theme. Students can either compose their own or collectively put together phrases to make haiku-like expressions of their feelings, reactions and grief. (5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables)

#### Haiku

Try to find two images that create a striking impression when connected and write them down. You might get something like this:

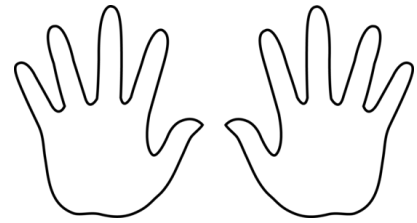
E.g. After it started to rain, fishermen steered their boats toward the shore. Then, I saw a family of ducks waddle over to the lake and swim across.

Pare the sentence down so it still describes the scene while inviting the reader to marvel at nature. How's this?

E.g. Sudden spring storm-  
a family of ducks paddles  
around the deserted lake.

17. Feelings list. Students generate a list of feelings that are written on the board. Make a second list of what we can do or how to express those feelings. For example, “I could go out for a walk, talk to a friend, take a hot bath, scream, call for help, say I’m sorry, do something nice for the family.”
18. Create a memory bulletin board in a central location such as the main hallway or front office. Designate it as a place to display special pictures of the deceased and to display special picture or messages.
19. Create a treasure box, a memory book or some other means of saving or keeping the memories of a loved one live after death. The treasure box could be decorated and special things that belonged to that person put inside. It could be a place to keep writings and pictures of him/her. The memory book could be something each student pictures of him/her and each student could write in it.

## Wave Goodbye



Put your hand in this space and draw a line around it. On each finger write a memory or what you liked best about the person who died, or what you would say to them if you had been able to say goodbye.

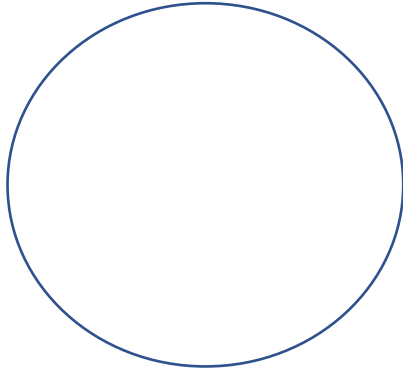
## Favorite Activity

Here is an activity to help you remember things about the person who died that make them special.

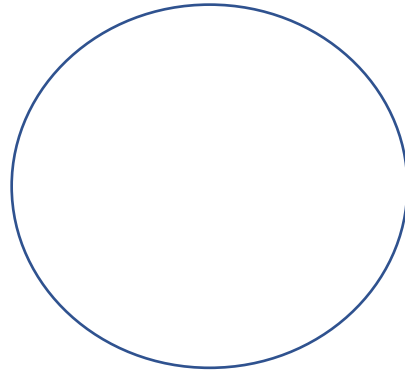
Things we like to do together:

# Feelings

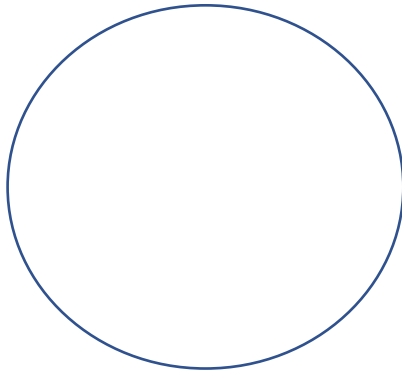
Everyone has lots of different feelings. They are all okay. Feelings change. Draw some feeling faces. Feelings often show on faces.



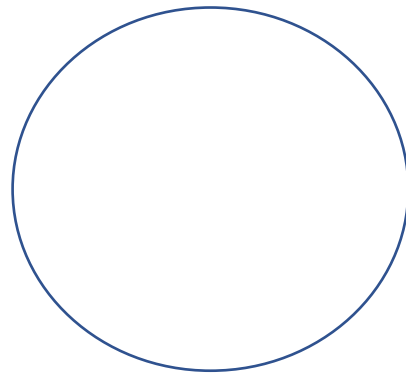
Happy



Angry



Afraid

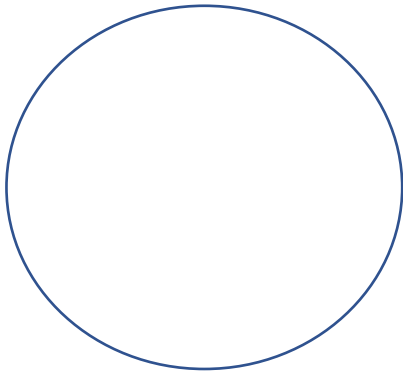


Guilty

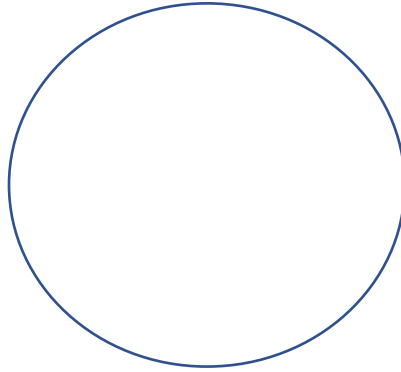
# Masks We Sometimes Wear

Sometimes people put on a mask to hide feelings they don't like to show.

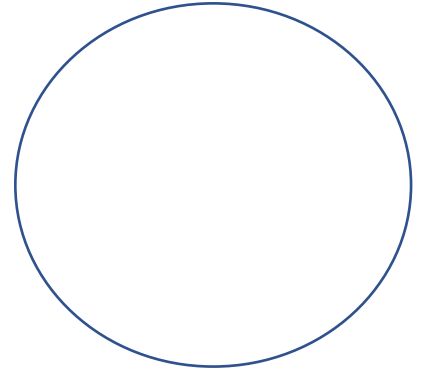
Name and draw 3 feelings you sometimes hide with a different feeling.



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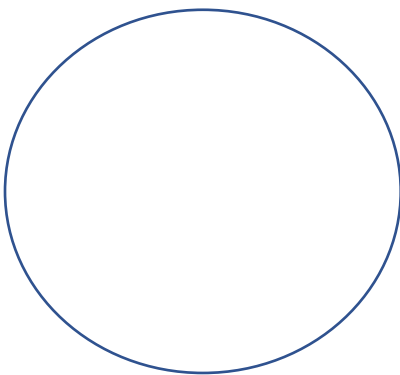


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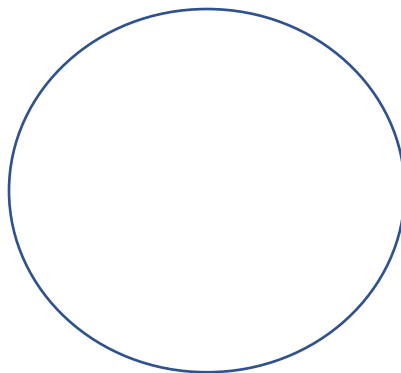


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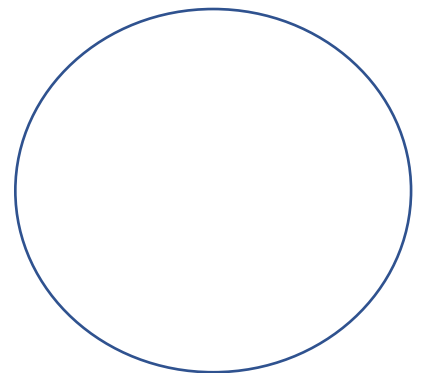
Name and draw the feeling masks you might use



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## What I Learned From \_\_\_\_\_

Something important I learned from this person is...

# My Favorite Memory

Good memories are mine to keep. Some of my favourite memories are:

# How I Like to Be Comforted

I know how I like to be comforted and I can use words and pictures to let others know what I need. Draw or write about the ways that you like to be comforted.

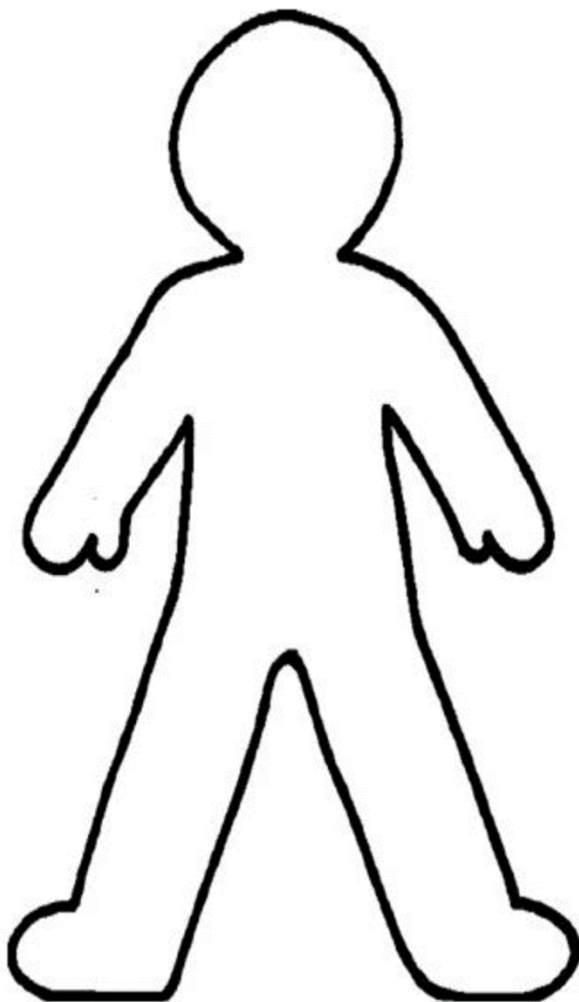
## I am Worried or Fearful About...

I have worries or fears about some things. Sharing your worries or fears by drawing, writing or talking about them make them less powerful when they are shared.

I feel frightened or worried about ....

## Body Feelings

If feelings are stuffed inside too long they often cause aches and pains.



Colour red lightly  
where you get little  
hurts

Colour bright red  
where you sometimes  
hurt a lot!

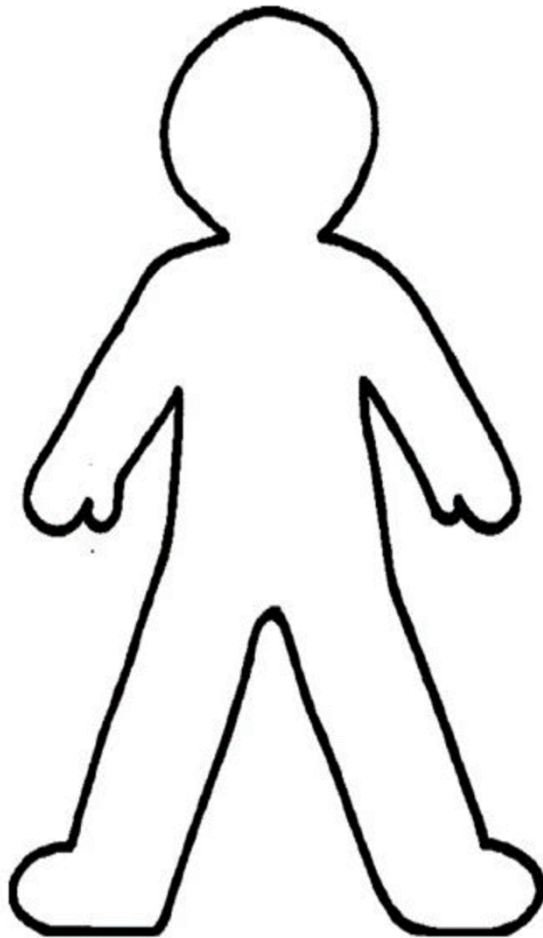
Is this the same place  
you keep fear or anger  
or other feelings?

Exercise, sports, play, music, art, writing and talking are all good ways to let feelings out.

# Body Feelings

Feelings are something we feel in our body. Where do you feel your feelings?  
Show the places with these colours:

sad	blue
fear	black
anger	red
nervous	orange
happy	yellow



# Letting Anger Out

It is important to let anger out in ways that will not hurt people or things. Okay ways are:

1. Saying “I am angry because...”
2. Scribbling with a red crayon on an old newspaper (hard!) and scrunch it into a ball to throw away.
3. Punching a ball or a pillow.
4. Yelling into a pillow or in a shower.
5. Writing an angry letter then tearing it up.
6. Writing feelings in a journal.
7. Run or walk fast.
8. Stomp your feet. Clap your hands.



## Feel free to...

1. Colour or Draw
2. Write about positive memories
3. Draw positive memories
4. Write a short note to someone to encourage them
5. Listen to music
6. Write or draw a positive memory on the banner
7. Do a puzzle or play a game quietly

## 8. Talk to an adult or friend



You can...



Draw or colour



Talk to an adult



Listen to Music



Write a message or memory



Play a game or do a puzzle



Have a snack or drink