



Section 1

Developing Your Tragedy Component: Planning and Team Preparation

The following discusses the need for planning and the roles of the team members. It contains the information and refers to forms your team will need to establish a **tragedy component** to your Crisis Response Plan. **The forms indicated can be found in Section 5 of this book.**

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The Need for Planning

Planning for a future tragedy is neither a pleasant nor desirable chore. It is completely natural to want to avoid such topics as death and suicide, especially when dealing with children. But the facts dictate that this subject merits discussion and action. The reality is that thousands of school-age children die each year. One in every seven children loses someone close to them to death before the child reaches the age of 10.¹ Thousands more experience the expected or unexpected deaths of siblings, grandparents and loved ones. For every one of those children, there are countless friends, classmates and siblings who are left to face their grief and continue living.

Of course schools are more than just students. There are also teachers, support staff, coaches, administrators, counselors and a host of others whose presence and actions support the school family. The loss of any one of these people can devastate a school and the surrounding community.

We cannot protect our young from the painful realities of life; attempting to do so inhibits growth.²

Now, more than ever, schools function as a second home for children. The classroom offers a structured and supportive environment, the kind that many children are not fortunate enough to experience in their own homes. This is a compliment to the effort that you and our schools put forth to improve the lives of our students.

When a tragedy happens at school or in their home life, children will naturally turn to the most stable force in their lives for support. For instance, if a child loses a grandparent, his or her parents may be incapable of dealing with their own grief, let alone their child's. This can leave children confused, upset and feeling as if they have been abandoned. They will then look to their school family for support.

The same holds true for adults. If you have experienced a crisis or lost a loved one, then you know how important friends and supportive co-workers can be. Birthdays, holidays and special events can be especially difficult when a loved one is no longer alive to share in the celebrations. When situations like this occur, we must remember that grieving is natural and is part of the healing process. The simple acts of listening, understanding and being supportive can have immediate and long-term benefits for both children and adults. These are just a few of the reasons that, as adults entrusted with the health, safety and growth of the next generation, it is our responsibility to prepare for tragic situations.

A school's goal in dealing with a death should be to:

1. Acknowledge the death honestly.
2. Allow students and staff to express their feelings.
3. Offer an outlet for students and staff who desire to help.

1. National Center for Health Statistics. (1997). Atlanta, GA. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
2. Wolheit, A. (1996). *Healing and the bereaved child*. Compassion Press.

Death Experiences

The following experiences are actual cases from one of the authors of this manual. They describe real situations and how they were handled.

CASE 1

In October of 1986, the accidental death of a popular eighth grade girl shocked our school. Our principal announced the death over the P.A. system at the beginning of school the following day by saying that “death is a part of life and we have to learn to handle it.” Our students were confused and frightened. Social workers were brought in from the outside in case students needed help. No more was said or done by the administration.

CASE 2

In February of 1988, a very popular teacher in our district was killed in a car accident. Students and staff were devastated. The building principal called all staff members together to organize a plan. The teacher’s personal property was removed from the classroom, and the school physical education teacher (who was well liked by the student body) was temporarily inserted into the deceased teacher’s classroom with a sound lesson plan to help the students work through their grief. A staff meeting was called early the next morning to let staff express their grief in the presence of each other and to introduce a plan of action to help the students when they arrived later that morning.

As you can imagine, both of these situations were very difficult to deal with. The first situation demonstrates how a difficult situation can be made even more difficult to bear. The administration’s policy to announce the death over the public address system came across as cold and distant. It created a closed feeling for the teachers and staff who felt that the principal had spoken and no more should be said. Teachers were given few official details and were unable to answer the student’s questions or calm their fears. Feelings of frustration and anger about the tragedy were heightened by this insensitive approach.

The second situation, although equally as tragic, was handled in a way that was both proactive and sensitive to the needs of staff and students. The principal’s decision to call an emergency meeting gave the staff time to deal with the loss, come to terms with the situation and bond to create a plan that would work best for their school. Replacing the deceased teacher with a friendly face made the situation easier on those students. The use of good communication and the administration’s acceptance of the tragedy gave the indication that it was okay to grieve.

The sense of togetherness described in the second situation is the one most favored by both faculty and students. In a recent survey of college students who had experienced a death at some point in their scholastic career, 95% of those surveyed did not like the way their school handled the crisis. The reason most cited was their school either did nothing or brought in outside counselors that the students did not know or trust. Respondents overwhelmingly favored the idea of the “School Family Planning” approach.

Definition of a “Tragic Situation”

For our intents and purposes, a **tragic situation** can be defined as a *time of great difficulty caused by an unexpected or anticipated death to a member of the school family*. The following is a list of the most common tragic situations. Although the list may be incomplete, the contents of this manual can be adapted or modified by your planning team to any situation.

- Suicide of a student.
- Suicide of a staff member.
- Death of a student.
- Death of a staff member.
- Death of a former student.
- Death of a student’s parent, sibling or other family member.
- Ripple effect from a non-directly related tragedy.
- Death of an administrator or significant leader.
- Death of a child or spouse of a staff member.

The Role of the Crisis Response Team

Upon completion of this program, your Crisis Response Team should be able to provide the following services:

- Serve as a resource to teachers who have questions or who may need help in conducting classroom discussions.
- Assist with small-group counseling.
- Work with students who require additional counseling.
- Work with the classmates of a deceased student.
- Work with classmates of surviving siblings.
- Offer parents an opportunity to discuss ramifications of the loss, characteristics they may wish to watch for in their children and how to further discuss matters with their children. The planning team may assist in the development of materials used to notify parents of this opportunity.
- Identify high-risk students among the close friends of a deceased student.

Building Your Crisis Response Team

Because a tragedy can happen at any time, it is recommended that a Crisis Response Team be formed in every school building within the district. It is recommended that the principals of each school be co-team leaders with a school counselor, as they are most often seen as the school leaders by students, staff, parents and the community.

The Team Leaders will likely be responsible for selecting the other members for the team, including members to staff the Crisis Rooms. Team members may consist of teachers, counselors, secretaries, coaches, administrators and other willing staff members. It is recommended that copies of the **Tragedy Response Implementation Plan** (page 125) be used in the planning stages here and beyond. Begin by establishing who the Crisis Team members will be. Selection should be based on the following characteristics:

- Team members should be comfortable working together. Because this is often a difficult task that takes place under very difficult conditions, look for team players.
- Team members should be people that the students see every day. Students and staff will need and want to see familiar faces if a tragedy strikes the school family. Simply put, at times of grief we need our friends.
- Team members should be well liked, respected and trusted by students and staff alike.
- Team members should be compassionate. This is a gift that will be vital at a time of crisis.
- Team members should be dedicated. Crises may occur at any hour, so team members must be willing to stay after work or work weekends when needed.
- It is also recommended that the team enlist an outside social worker or psychologist to serve in an advisory position for the Crisis Response Team.

We recommend that members of the Crisis Response Team participate in an in-service training, such as the Grief and Suicide Prevention Training workshops. In-service programs provide a deeper understanding of the grief and trauma associated with loss. This background is helpful for team members when guiding others through crises and making decisions regarding intervention following a death.

Crisis Response Team Members and Responsibilities

Team Co-Leaders (Principal, Counselor)

It is the responsibility of the Team Leaders (usually the building principal and counselor) to verify that a death has occurred. When calling parents or relatives of a deceased student or staff member, the team leader needs to state who is calling, indicate the purpose of the call and identify how the information was obtained. The team leaders should inform parents of the steps that the school will be taking and let them know that the school is available to them if needed. It is important that the team leaders be sensitive, reassuring and sympathetic.

The team leaders also need to explain that it would be helpful for the staff and students to receive information about the death and ask the deceased's family for permission to supply teachers with a statement to read in class. Information about funeral arrangements (if known) should be included in the statement. The name of the team's family liaison should be given to the relatives, and they should be told that the liaison will be in contact.

Additional responsibilities of the Team Leaders include:

- Notifying the superintendent, assistant superintendents and others in the school district.
- Notifying the Media Liaison and Family Liaison.
- Notifying and assembling the Planning Team.
- Scheduling an emergency meeting to inform the staff.
- Hiring substitute teachers to replace Planning Team members.
- Writing an announcement, with input from the Team, to be read in classes.
- Writing and sending a condolence letter to the parents.
- Establishing Crisis Rooms where students and staff can receive assistance.
- Granting staff release time for the funeral.
- Attending the funeral.

A decision to announce the loss at other schools in the district should be made by the Team and the school's administration after assessing the loss and its impact. Telephone contact should be made to other buildings if their staff are to be notified and if their Plans need to be activated.

Family Liaison

The Family Liaison should be a person who has had contact with the family on previous occasions. Families are usually most receptive to school employees that either they or the deceased had positive experiences with in the past. The impression the family receives from the Family Liaison will be the impression they will have of the entire school's response to the death of their loved one. Therefore, this person must be able to communicate in a sensitive manner. When contacting the family, the Family Liaison should identify himself or herself, express sympathy and share any personal feelings about the deceased.

Responsibilities of the Family Liaison include:

- Contacting the family.
- Offering to help the family.
(Suggestions: arranging meals, arranging transportation, running necessary errands, house sitting during funeral, pet care, child-care for siblings, recording of gifts, condolences, and kindnesses extended, etc.)
- Obtaining accurate information from the family.
- Informing the family of school tragedy response plans and procedures.
- Helping the family gather the deceased's personal items from school.
- Attending the funeral.

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- Keeping in contact with the family after the funeral.
- Following up with key individuals (e.g., friends, parents) of the deceased to make sure they know how and where they may obtain support.
- Providing assistance and referrals for staff members who experience personal trauma related to the loss.
- Requesting further assistance from appropriate outside agencies if necessary.

NOTE: If the Family Liaison has not had experience with the person or family in crisis, it would be appropriate to have another staff member who *has* had experience with the family work with the Family Liaison.

Media Liaison

The Media Liaison should be an individual who understands what information should be given to the media and what is too sensitive for public knowledge. It is strongly recommended that the media not be allowed to roam the school grounds and interview people at will. Mixed messages may occur, and the grieving family may be offended, which would make a difficult situation even worse.

Responsibilities of the Media Liaison include:

- Making himself or herself known to the media as the school's one and only contact person.
- Supplying media with information pertaining to the crisis.
- Keeping media out of the school.
- Notifying teachers and staff that the Media Liaison is the school's primary media contact.
- Attending the funeral.

NOTE: The Media Liaison will need to work in tandem with the Family Liaison to determine what information has been approved by the family to be shared with the media.

Roamers

Roamers are members of the Crisis Response Team who are present in the halls, interacting with students, during the first few days following a crisis. Roamers should be well known by students and staff and be comfortable communicating with both groups.

Responsibilities of the Roamers include:

- Being visible in the halls to help maintain order.
- Being in the cafeteria at all student lunch hours.
- Talking with students and staff.
- Escorting students to the Crisis Room if needed.
- Being able to relieve other teachers who may need to go to the Crisis Room or need time alone to express their feelings in private.

- Providing classroom teachers with materials needed for students who wish to create cards for the family.
- Being available to speak to classmates of the deceased's siblings about how to respond upon their return to school. This can be accomplished the first 10 minutes of each class.
- Assisting, in any way possible, in making the grieving process easier.

Counselors

School counselors are trained listeners and play a vital role in making the Crisis Room a safe atmosphere for students and staff. Counselors can expect students to visit the Crisis Room after the death of a member of the school family. They should encourage students to talk about their feelings and let them know that these feelings are natural. Counselors need to allow students or staff to cry and to show their feelings. They should refer students, if necessary, to available community support resources.

Responsibilities of the counselors include:

- Staffing the Crisis Rooms.
- Talking with students about the crisis.
- Clarifying misinformation.
- Encouraging students and staff to express their feelings.
- Contacting community support resources, such as specialized counselors and psychologists if needed.
- Providing grief information.
- Making no judgments about individual methods of grieving.
- Providing referrals to community resources.
- Contacting parents if necessary.
- Supporting students.
- Attending the funeral.

Teachers

Teachers are the primary school contact for the students. Not all teachers will be on the planning team, but all share the responsibility of maintaining a safe and stable environment in the face of a crisis.

Responsibilities of teachers include:

- Reading announcements and talking with students about the loss.
- Modifying class lesson plans as needed.
- Modifying the time schedule of classes as needed.
- Facilitating activities to encourage expression of feelings.
- Providing grief information.
- Expressing feelings.
- Supporting activities that encourage remembering the deceased.
- Referring students to the Crisis Room if necessary.

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- Helping create letters of condolence for the family.
- Attending the funeral.

In summary, a **tragedy component** to your school Crisis Response Team provides students and staff with an opportunity to talk through their grief, allowing them to safely express their feelings. Students and staff should have designated Crisis Rooms made available as safe havens for assistance and support. Also, each student and staff member should be given an opportunity to write a condolence letter to the family, participate in remembrance activity planning, and attend the funeral.

Addressing the Issues

As members of your school's Crisis Response Team, you will not only have to face your own grief, fears and frustrations at a time of crisis, but also act in a way that ensures the safety of your fellow students and staff members. Use this opportunity to think about your roles and responsibilities on the team. Use the **School Faculty and Staff Issues** forms (see page 121) with your fellow team members as you do your planning. This will help familiarize you with the types of questions that will need to be answered in a time of crisis.

NOTE: The **School Faculty and Staff Issues** forms (see page 121) will be a vital tool to your team's preparedness in the unfortunate event that you should have a crisis. Familiarize yourself with it now and be prepared to act quickly during a crisis.

Crisis Room Preparation

Crisis Rooms are assigned rooms, staffed by Crisis Response Team Counselors, where students and staff can go when they need support or privacy while dealing with a crisis. It is the responsibility of those staffing the room to offer help in relation to the crisis, *not* to resolve all of the issues that are happening in an individual's life. If students or staff have additional problems, they should be referred to a community professional.

Guidelines for staffing the Crisis Room include the following:

- Set up the room for privacy so no one can hear or see those inside.
- Arrange furniture so that conversations can be held without desks or tables between parties.
- Listen to individuals describe their feelings and fears.
- Always have someone available.
- If an individual shares troubling family issues which raise red flags or show signs of suicide, refer the person to a counseling center or private therapist. Document the referral and whether or not the individual accepted it.

Counseling a Person In Crisis

The following are suggestions for working with and counseling individuals who are undergoing a crisis situation:

- Encourage them to share personal feelings. Use opening statements such as “How is this situation affecting you?”
- Allow them to remember the person who has died. Do not change the subject. Allow them to discuss the situation, even if it is uncomfortable.
- Do not tell them what they should or should not feel.
- Ask questions about the deceased. Questions such as “Were the two of you close?” show that you care about their relationship and that it was important.
- Share good memories of the deceased.
- Encourage them to engage in a memorial activity.
- Avoid making comments such as “I know how you feel,” unless you have truly been in a similar situation.
- If appropriate, share expertise about the grief cycle.
- Say “I do not know,” when you cannot answer questions.

If the tragedy was a suicide, probe their own suicide potential by: (1) using the SLAP method described in this manual (see page 149), (2) asking if they would be interested in talking with a professional counselor, (3) making arrangements for students who ask for help and (4) offering a hug if it seems appropriate.

Community Resources

A list of community resources and individuals is of paramount importance to the Crisis Response Team. Phone numbers of agencies and individuals should be provided to every team member. Agencies and individuals include, but are not limited to:

- County Mental Health Services
- Social Services
- Hospice
- Hospitals (social and spiritual services, psychiatric unit, etc.)
- Psychologists
- Social Workers
- Funeral Directors
- Clergy
- Others

NOTE: As you plan with your Crisis Response Team, copy and fill out the **Community Resources Sheet** (see page 119) so that help may be accessed quickly during a crisis.

Student Funeral Home Visitation

After the tragic death of a classmate or staff member at school, many students may wish (and are encouraged) to go to the funeral home visitation, funeral, or wake service. The crisis team needs to take into consideration that students will need comfort and support at these functions and have an organized system of staff volunteers ready to serve.

NOTE: Some cultures and religions may be very unfamiliar to students. The crisis team should prepare students for the unfamiliar customs and practices of these cultures and/or religions and instruct about appropriate behavior at these functions.

The following is a sample form for a funeral home visitation:

Funeral Home Visitation Sign-up

Name of Funeral Home: _____

Date: _____ Date: _____

Time: ____:____^{AM}/_{PM} ____:____^{AM}/_{PM} Time: ____:____^{AM}/_{PM} ____:____^{AM}/_{PM}

Date	Time	Staff Members
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
_____	____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM} to ____:____ ^{AM} / _{PM}	_____
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Crisis Team Plan in Review

The following is a step-by-step format you may follow to develop your school's crisis plan:

- Obtain a charge from your board of education to develop a plan.
- Decide who will be in charge during a crisis.
- Select your Crisis Response Team.
- Develop clear and consistent policies and procedures.
- Provide training for the team and entire staff.
- Establish a working relationship with the police department.
- Select a media liaison and a location to meet the media.
- Make a list of community resources and establish a working relationship with them.
- Create and keep an updated phone tree.
- Develop necessary forms and information sheets.
- Develop a plan for emergency coverage of classes.
- Develop a collection of readings.
- Have all district administrators and board of education review the plan.
- Hold a short annual review meeting.

NOTE: It is strongly suggested that the school Crisis Response Team meet at least once a year to update the communication phone tree, review policy and procedure, and replace retired staff members serving on the crisis team or members who no longer wish to serve. Not holding this meeting will make it more difficult for the crisis team once a tragedy occurs.