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**See page 74 for information about Downloadable Resources.**

# Introduction

Imagine this situation. You arrive at school one morning to hear that one of your students died in a car accident on the way to school. Then you find out it was a student in your first period class. You think about how friendly and outgoing she was. How she was always upbeat and involved. In a few minutes you will have to face her classmates and deliver the bad news. What will you say to them? Will you carry on with a “normal” day of lessons, communicating to your students that “life goes on”? Or, will you face this difficulty by demonstrating honesty and compassion for both the deceased student and her classmates? If you have experienced such a crisis, you know just how painful this can be.

Perhaps the most valuable response to crisis is the ability to make ourselves do the things we have to do when they ought to be done, whether we like it or not. The death of a student or staff member can devastate a school and its surrounding community. When such a tragedy touches a school community, it is a school family issue, not just a counseling department issue.

Research and my experience prove that the number one need of the students and staff at this time is comfort. Shortly after the incident, shock, fear, and anxiety usually set in. People must come to normalization before quality cognitive processes can take place. Counseling is a cognitive process. If normalization does not first happen, the people being counseled cannot “connect the dots.”

Research by The National Institute of Trauma and Loss in Children suggests that comfort brings normalization, thus, I developed the motto “comfort before counseling” as a best practice.<sup>1</sup> In an informal survey Dr. Joel Robertson and I conducted in 1994, surveying thousands of students in several states, we found that 79 percent of students wish to be comforted by their classroom teacher after a tragedy touches a school community.<sup>2</sup> The primary reasoning on their part is that they see their teacher every day at school and have an established relationship with that teacher. Students, for the most part, only occasionally speak with the school counselor. An overwhelming 86 percent of students also stated that they would rather not speak with a stranger about a painful event such as an unexpected school tragedy. Thus, the practice of bringing in counselors unfamiliar to students is not as effective a practice as it may seem. These outside counselors do not have

relationships with the students and are only around for a day or two. When they leave the school, it is assumed the school environment is “back to normal.” I am not asking classroom teachers to be counselors. I am asking them to be comforters so school counselors are in a better position to do the job of counseling.

At a conference a few years back, I met a married couple who had a first grader and kindergartener who were both students at Newtown when the terrible tragedy occurred there. Their first grader was killed, and their kindergartener survived the shooting. They shared with me that there was an outpouring of support from mental health professionals and organizations around the country. One group, in particular, came from Chicago and, in this family’s opinion, made the most positive impact on the students and staff who survived the tragedy. But they weren’t people. They were golden retrievers. As you know, golden retrievers can’t talk. Yet, this couple said that their kindergartener told the dogs things that he wouldn’t share with the mental health professionals. What made these dogs so helpful? I believe it was their non-judgmental presence. That is more powerful than anything anyone can say. Your presence at these difficult times shows that you care.

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In my thirty-three years in K–12 education, I experienced the deaths of twenty-six students and staff members combined. Some of my experiences were as follows:

- I became a replacement teacher in a fifth-grade classroom for a teacher who was killed in an accident in the middle of the school year.
- An eighth-grade boy was hit and killed while riding his bike to school.
- An eighth-grade girl was killed after crashing into a garbage truck while riding a four-wheeler.
- A senior in high school unexpectedly died by suicide one morning before school.
- A popular industrial arts teacher died suddenly from a heart attack before school.
- A seventh-grade girl died of a brain aneurism during the school day outside my classroom.

None of us can fully prepare for tragedies such as these. Even with the best preparation, our feet are still knocked out from under us when it happens. The loss of a student or staff member impacts the entire school family. It is shocking and heartbreaking. It impacts students every time they walk into a classroom and see an empty desk, a space that reminds them of the person who died, or a substitute teacher sitting in for a teacher who died.

In this short book, I wish to share with you the lessons I have learned in order to help you, your students, the parents of your students, and your staff through these challenging times.



# 1

## Lessons Learned in Loss

One of the most important lessons I learned in dealing with loss in the education setting was that the comforting phase must come before counseling takes place. This phase is best accomplished in what I call Classroom Defusing Discussions facilitated by the teacher. I will provide an example in just a moment, but first I want to share some basic principles for the classroom defusing discussions. Teachers, educators, and counselors should all keep these principles in mind.

- Explanations must be simple, not medical or theological.
- Over-explaining reflects your own anxiety to the students.
- Students need to talk, not just be talked to!
- When talking to students about suicide, *never* say “he or she is better off.”
- It is not the *expression* but the *suppression* of feeling that is most harmful.
- The way you are most doomed to failure in handling a tragedy is to deny or ignore it.
- Students’ greatest needs at this time are *trust* and *truth*.

### Classroom Defusing Discussion

1. The classroom teacher should start with an opening statement:

*We are sad to learn that \_\_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade died last night as a result of a car accident. This is all the information we have at this time. As more information becomes available, such as funeral arrangements and memorial services, we will pass it on to you. After our discussion here, counselors will be available in a support room should anyone like to talk further about feelings you are experiencing.*

2. Allow a minute or two for the news to sink in for students.
3. The teacher then should express how he/she is impacted by the incident. This is very important as the students at this time especially need to see the teacher as a person, not as a teacher. "I am very sad and shocked by this news, and I am especially sad for \_\_\_\_\_'s family."
4. Ask students to share positive memories of the deceased.
5. Talk about feelings of grief. (See Appendix 2: Normal Versus Abnormal Grief.)
6. Encourage students to attend the visitation and funeral, and inform them of what to expect at the funeral home and funeral in regards to the family's religion and culture. You may ask, "How many of you have been to a visitation or funeral before? They can be very sad, and you might see some people crying. It may be quiet and very solemn. But attending a funeral is a way we can show that we care and give our respect to a family in their time of loss. It may feel a little awkward or scary at first. But it means a lot to a family to hear what their loved ones meant to others. Be aware that you may see customs you haven't seen before and don't understand, but that is okay."
7. Encourage students to make a card, draw a picture, plan a memorial at the school, etc.
8. Tell the students that the class is going to move on to classroom work, but tell them that they can stop working at any point to further discuss the tragedy or if they are simply feeling overwhelmed by grief.

9. Students who opt to go to the counseling room should be accompanied by an adult both there and returning to the classroom.
10. Station both female and male staff members in the hallways to assist staff if needed. Students may wish to go to the restroom to cry or dry their faces and should be allowed to do so.
11. Tell young children that they can bring a stuffed animal or something familiar with them to school to provide security.

## Important Points

The teacher must have all the facts about the incident from the school crisis team to dispel any rumors. These rumors can make a sad situation much worse. If possible, the teacher should also have time to personally process the tragedy in an information/debriefing session with colleagues. If we as adults don't tend to our feelings in these situations, how can we care for and comfort our students?

During this session, the staff should discuss questions the students may bring up, such as:

1. Why did the death happen?
2. What is a funeral and what happens at a funeral?
3. Will others I love die?
4. What will happen to me if one of my parents or both of my parents die?

There are no easy answers to these questions. However, the staff discussion session can create consistency in how to respond to students. Getting advice from the school counselor is very important during the session.

The other day, I was on an airplane traveling to a conference. Before takeoff, the flight attendant went through the safety procedures in case a crisis occurred during flight. If you've ever flown, you know that one of the procedures is that oxygen masks will come down from the ceiling if at any point the cabin loses air pressure. The instruction is to *put on your own mask before you assist anyone else with theirs*. It struck me that the same should occur in a school crisis situation. Whenever possible, school staff should be given the opportunity to put on their own oxygen masks first. This could be accomplished by scheduling a meeting with administration and teachers, giving them time to process what has happened so they are better prepared to communicate with their students.

## Things We Shouldn't Say

It's also important to note that there are actually things we should never say to students after the loss of a loved one. Although most people know this already, you'd be surprised what even the most self-aware person will say when they don't know what else to say. Even when our words are well-intentioned, they can often make a heartbreaking situation much worse. Here are a few examples of things we shouldn't say:

- "She wouldn't want you to be sad." — Since the child is sad, saying this may make them feel like they are disappointing their deceased friend.
- "This will make you stronger." — Saying this implies that they are weak.
- "He is in a better place." — This can be confusing and hurtful because the child or adolescent wants the person to be with them.
- "I know how you feel." — This communicates that you don't need to hear what the student has to say.
- "God needed your friend." — Saying this implies that they didn't need her enough.



I personally witnessed one of the above statements when I was working in a funeral home during graduate school. While writing my master's degree thesis, *Death Education: Guidelines for Classroom Teachers*, I worked part time in a funeral home as the aftercare consultant to the families of the deceased.

In one particular situation, I was helping during a visitation for a man who left behind a wife and an eleven-year-old son. As I stood in the hallway outside the chapel listening to the boy talk about his father, a lady (later found out to be his aunt) came up to him and said, "Don't worry, Thomas. God needed your dad." After she walked away, Thomas (not his real name) looked up at me and said, "I guess I didn't need my dad enough." My heart broke for Thomas as I saw the horrible look of guilt wash over his face.

Statements like this send the often unintentional but extremely hurtful message: "Stop feeling so bad." It is impossible to tell anyone how to feel. These statements minimize and ignore the feelings of the grieving person who has been touched by a death. There are many ways we can minimize someone's feelings, but the biggest piece of advice I can give on this hurtful approach is this: when speaking to a grieving person, never start a sentence with "at least." "At least they don't have to suffer anymore." "At least they are in a better place." "At least you still have the rest of your family." None of these statements are helpful.

## **Finding the Right Words**

The following is adapted from the December 2010 issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine that listed "not helpful" and "more helpful" things to say to someone who is going through a difficult time:<sup>3</sup>

## NOT HELPFUL

*I know how you feel.*

*I know what that's like.*

*It's time to put this behind you.*

*It could be worse.*

*Keep the faith.*

*It happened for the best.*

## MORE HELPFUL

*I can only imagine how hard this must be.*

*Do you mind telling me what it's like?*

*This might take time.*

*You have a lot on your plate.*

*I'm thinking of you every day.*

*I'm so sorry this happened.*

This list could be endless. The lesson is to stop and imagine what the child needs to hear from you, not what you feel you “need” to say. We cannot and should not try to fix the tragedy. Although we wish these things would never happen, when properly handled, the incident can become a growth experience instead of just a tragic experience.

One example of a growth experience happened when I was the family liaison on our school crisis team. One morning an eighth-grade boy was killed riding his bike to school. Shortly after the incident, I met with his parents to express my condolences, share my warm feelings for their son, and make a list of immediate needs we as their school family could help them with. Our staff provided meals, picked up relatives at the airport and bus station, arranged house-sitting for them during the visitation and funeral service, and helped with many other needs.

The deceased boy's classmates must have been observing the ways we were serving his family. On the morning of the funeral, four inches of new snow fell to the ground. Without any requests from our staff, four eighth-grade boys showed up at the family's

house and shoveled the sidewalk and driveway because they wanted to help the family as well. This wasn't just a growth experience for our school staff. This was a growth experience for these students too. They followed our example and reached out to help this family in their time of need.

## **In Conclusion**

When loss happens in our school community, what we say as teachers and educators is extremely important. We should provide a familiar place of comfort for our students. We should be consistent, but not too lax or too rigid. We should maintain the same boundaries and rules but allow for students to talk or ask questions when they need to. At the same time, we should give the student the right not to share if they don't want to. We all react to tragedy differently, and we all move at different speeds through the grief process. We can't expect a child or adolescent to feel something they do not. And we should speak with understanding, avoiding unhelpful words and replacing them with words of empathy. Finally, if you need additional help or see students who are stuffing their emotions, speak to the school counselor and ask for guidance.

## **A Student's Story**

Helen (not her real name) was a seventh-grade student of mine whose father died of a sudden heart attack. Helen's father, Steve (also not his real name), and I had once worked on a school fundraiser together and became good friends. At his funeral, I did not get the chance to talk to Helen. When she came back to school a week after the funeral, I greeted her and said, "Helen, I am sorry about you losing your father. I got to know him well during our school fundraiser and really enjoyed working with him. He became a valued friend of mine, and I will miss him."

About a month later, on the last day of school, the students were dismissed and the hallways were empty. As I walked back to my classroom from being on hall duty, Helen was waiting to talk to me. She said, "Mr. Opalewski, I want to thank you for what you said to me the day I came back to school after my dad's funeral." I asked her, "Didn't your other teachers say something to you?" "Yes," she responded. "They all told me they were sorry, but you said my dad's name. Thank you."

In that moment, I remembered that one of the greatest fears of children and adolescents after losing a loved one is that they are going to be forgotten. When you mention the name of their deceased loved one, you assure them that they will not be forgotten and you communicate that you are willing to take the time to be available if they should need to talk to you.

???

**QUESTIONS  
to  
CONSIDER** ???

1. Have you ever had to share the news of a loss with your students? If so, how did it go? If not, what points in the Classroom Defusing Discussion above stood out to you?

2. What are some things we should never say to students when talking about death or suicide?

3. What are some of the more helpful things we should say to students when addressing loss?

**KEY  
POINTS**

- When dealing with loss in the classroom setting, comforting should always come before counseling.
- In the Classroom Defusing Discussion, teachers should communicate the loss to their students with empathy and without over-explaining. They should give the students time to talk and share, explain funeral arrangements and what to expect, and give them the opportunity to visit the counseling room.
- Even the most well-intentioned people can say hurtful things to someone who has experienced loss. It is important to know the things we should *never* say and to learn the more helpful things to say instead.