

Crisis Day Guidelines For Teachers

Remember this! You don't have to become an instant counselor. Students simply need you to be there for them. They need time to explore the meaning of this death. Be consistent enough about discipline so there is enough structure for them to feel safe, but flexible enough for students to "breathe". Allowing them to see your grief is a gift and a model for expressing feelings.

A Flight Team member can read the death announcement to students if you'd prefer, but remain in the room so you can see students' reactions. After the announcement, do some processing. Share your own feelings. Avoid blame or guilt. Help students make "I" statements ("This is how it is for me," rather than, focusing on others.)

After the announcement you might mention to students that this will be a tough day for some, and that you expect all students to be responsible in their behavior and respectful toward others. Give examples, like: "When one person is speaking, all others need to listen" and "No teasing." Ask students to give other examples of being respectful and responsible. Then lead a discussion. Lead-ins might include:

- *Had some of you already heard about this? How did you hear?*
- *How many of you have lost others to death before this?*
- *Let's make a list of the kinds of reactions and feelings people have at times like this.*
- *What kinds of things have people said or done that were helpful for your families at times like this?*

Don't force students to talk, but be sure all who wish to speak have the opportunity. Realize the importance of truth. That can be difficult. If there are aspects that are inappropriate for students to hear, don't tell them a "cover" story. Be honest in saying that you aren't able to talk about that part at this time. Because students are thirsting for information, this sometimes makes them angry or frightened. It is OK to ask them how it is for them when they can't have all of the details. Validate their frustration. It is based in a very basic need to know. We really can't begin grieving effectively until we know enough to understand what it is we are grieving. Grief from a suicide is very different than grief from an accident. This is a good time to remember that you can't take away their pain. You can just be there for them.

Avoid being judgmental, giving advice or giving your own answers. Stick to the truth and then encourage students to explore the loss (their grief, their loss?) and come up with their own answers. These conversations may wax and wane during the day, so the day may be one of weaving back and forth between these discussions and academics.

Allow quiet time, time to write or draw pictures, as well as time for students to gather with peers to talk (in adult-supervised places) - reminiscing and memory-sharing, exchanging notions about death, funerals, etc., and talking about feelings they're experiencing. Accept the feelings, i.e., "It makes sense to me that you might feel that way." Realize that some students may have negative feelings about the deceased. Allow those feelings to be expressed, also. Support the honesty. If there are feelings of revenge toward others because of the nature of the death (i.e., a student was driving a car and a passenger-student died) caution students about the difference in acknowledging their feelings and taking action. Make clear that no matter how students feel, they are responsible for their behaviors. Allow the day to alternate between processing and academics as student needs seem to dictate.

Encourage students to use the Safe Room as needed. Getting the students who are most impacted to the Safe Room allows your class to return to normalcy more quickly. Get students out for recess - they need the break and the physical exercise. Help kids network. Give encouragement to those who wish to contribute to the Life Tribute. Participation on any level gives the Life Tribute much more meaning for kids, thus it meets a real need (for meaning, contribution and community) and provides a foundation for turning the corner or "moving on" when the formal grieving period is over.

In the coming weeks, watch for signs of depression or changes in attendance, academic performance or behavior. Refer students of concern to the counselor. Ask for breaks and take good care of yourself!

