

Supporting Youth in Grief

Youth need or may benefit from any of the following:

THE TRUTH ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED

If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This is both a sign of respect for the students' integrity as well as essential for your credibility.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK ABOUT THE EVENT

Youth may need to talk about the event, as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Too, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.

UNDERSTANDING THAT THIS EVENT MIGHT BE A "TRIGGER"

This event may cause them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something frightening in their histories.

COMPASSION AS THEY LEARN TO COPE

Adults in their lives, including relatives, friends, and school staff, need to understand that if the youth comes from a chaotic or dysfunctional home, their abilities to cope with grief and tragedy at school is likely diminished.

PERMISSION TO USE THE SCHOOL SAFE ROOM

If the event happened at school or affected the community as a whole, the school may create a Safe Room. This is a grieving room following deaths, and is a place set aside for students whose grief has such impact that the student really can't concentrate on academics.

Youth need to be able to access 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 some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the Safe Room and let the staff there send the students who are not using the grieving process there back to their class rooms.

5 Radical Minute's founder Cheri Lovre wrote a book called [The Safe Room: A Guide for School Crisis Responders](#) that covers all dimensions of facilitating Safe Rooms.

HELP UNDERSTANDING WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE

As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with youth about whether they've ever been to a funeral, what it was like for those who have, and what you know about this one.

CONTINUED STRUCTURE IN THE DAILY SCHEDULE

It is usually better to continue to have youth stay at school, where they can grieve with others. They can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule and showing up for all or many of their usual classes, because there is a sense of routine. It is very helpful, however, to suspend the academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period, or in extreme events, most of the day.

CONSISTENCY IN DISCIPLINE (WITH FLEXIBILITY)

Often at times such as this, youth feel as if life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behavior is not within the usual realm. Exceptions may be made in regard to expectations of how much gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of life which do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure.

ENCOURAGEMENT TOWARDS POSITIVE ACTION

- Support each other for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- Put extra energy into friendships. Exchange phone numbers with each other.
- Take good care of themselves by eating well and getting lots of rest.

YOUTH DO NOT NEED YOU TO BE A COUNSELOR

Youth do not need you to be an instant counselor. Here's what they do need:

- They need you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings.
- They need to feel safe and not judged. If your community is going through a tragedy or trauma, it may help to remember that the first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions ebbing and flowing during the day.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can further help support youth in the process of grief:

- [Facilitating Grief Groups](#). This extended online course taught by 5 Radical Minutes founder Cheri Lovre, empowers the lay person to lead a grief group.
- [School Counselor Prompts on Grief](#). This 10-week set of prompts works effectively with small groups. (Also included are prompts on anxiety, depression, addiction in the home, etc.)