



**ACADEMY of Grief & Loss**  
INFORMATION  
RESOURCES  
EDUCATION  
SUPPORT

## Responding Appropriately to Death Crises at School

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**Purpose:** To be proactive rather than reactive in any potential "crisis" situation

### I. Creating the "Plans"

- A. **Plan I** = the simpler, the better -- step 1, step 2, etc. -- can be used in any situation (include a listing of professionals from various disciplines who can be called in if needed)
- B. **Plan II** = specific to the current situation
- C. Circulate to designated "key" people - those who would be key players when an event occurs (i.e. *crisis team* members)

### II. Important Considerations for STUDENTS

- A. **FACTS** - as soon as possible, a clear explanation of what has occurred should be announced to the students; this will help to curb the damage a rumor mill can cause
  1. Honesty
  2. No EuphemismsA statement should be prepared by the crisis team which clearly explains the facts. This statement will then be read to the students by staff or team members so that consistency is assured. This also takes into consideration the emotional state of staff members; it is much easier to read a prepared statement.
- B. **QUESTIONS** - a time for the asking/answering of questions must be set aside ASAP, preferably with a crisis team member.
- C. **CONTINUED UPDATES** - as soon as new information is learned, that needs to be passed along to the students as well (i.e., new facts, funeral information, the school's response, etc.)
- D. **PARTICIPATION** - students should be given the opportunity to participate where appropriate
  1. Attending funeral/memorial services
  2. Helping to plan a way for the school to honor the person if it was a death:
    - a. yearbook
    - b. fundraisers
    - c. plaque
    - d. tree planting
    - e. bulletin "memory" board
    - f. etc., etc., etc.
- E. **SHARING** - follow-up with the students who wish to talk about their feelings, etc. (can be formal or informal; timing is no issue)



### III. Important Considerations for STAFF

- A. Staff should **BE FAMILIAR** with the main steps to Plan I **prior to a crisis**
  - 1. The **ORDER** in which things will typically occur
  - 2. Where to meet/how information will be disseminated when a crisis occurs
  - 3. Who are the crisis team members? (Perhaps allow interested staff to come to an informational meeting when the crisis team is being organized)
  - 4. Consider creating a **PHONE TREE** if there is not already one in place
  - 5. Determine who the **MEDIA SPOKESPERSON** will be
- B. **FACTS**
- C. **QUESTIONS**
- D. **CONTINUED UPDATES**
- E. **PARTICIPATION**
- F. **DEBRIEFING**
  - 1. Timing not an issue; just so it gets done!
  - 2. Can be formal or informal
- A. **SUPPORT**
  - 1. During the crisis time - this might be in the form of assigning "class helpers" during the day so that the teachers have the option to leave the room if needed
  - 2. After crisis time - can be formal or informal: scheduled sharing times among staff members, or bringing in a grief counselor to facilitate.

### IV. Response from the SCHOOL - If it is a death that has occurred, steps need to be taken to memorialize the life or lives *no matter what the cause of death...*

- A. Honors the life of the person who died
- B. Honors the family of the deceased
- C. Provides a 'grief touch-point' for all of those affected by the death
- D. Shows staff and students that if anything were to happen to them, they are part of a caring institution that responds appropriately
- E. *If a school-related death occurs during the summer, it would be very appropriate for staff and families to receive a letter from the school in response to that death.*

### V. Other Notes:

## Important Consideration

All too often, adults are negatively influenced by the cause of death, particularly if the death was suicide or alcohol/drug-related. It is extremely unhealthy for teens to be denied adequate outlets for their grief based on how or why the person died. The bottom line is: someone special to them has died – irregardless of the circumstances of the death. Schools who disallow memorialization because it is a suicide for example, are creating an environment of frustration and hostility for the surviving friends. These survivors are left to feel as if *they* are being punished for their friend's decision. Furthermore, it is, in effect, denying the **life** of that child who died! One of the most important things we can teach our children is how to **honor life**.

## The Glorifying MYTH

To suggest that we are “glorifying” the cause of death (i.e., suicide) by acknowledging that a student has died is an over-used cliché in many schools. The assumption is that drawing attention to that student in any way will cause the surviving students to go kill themselves as well. However, does it make sense that if we acknowledge a child who has died from reckless driving, all of the other students are going to go drive recklessly? If we acknowledge a child who has died from cancer, will all the other students want to contract the disease as well? Of course not! Then why, when it is suicide, do we presuppose the same?

To “glorify” means to ‘praise’, ‘worship’ or ‘adore’. Acknowledging a student has died is honoring a life that was lived. Those are two very different things.

*Here is the bottom line:*

**We can absolutely honor a life without “glorifying” the cause of death.**

“Copy-cat” suicides are much more likely to occur when the *first* suicide is not treated with respect, compassion and peer prevention efforts.