



GRIEF IN THE CLASSROOM

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During my nineteen years of teaching high school, I had to deal with the death of several students. It was something that I was totally unprepared for. I felt inept in my approach to the grieving students and family members. I attended funerals, I spoke to parents, I wrote letters, and yet I wanted to do more. The untimely death of a child is unnatural, and the grief process that follows is very difficult to handle. Fear, confusion, and anger are a few of the many emotions that need to be addressed after a child's death. It is something that most of us as parents and teachers don't want to think about, let alone actually have to face. I don't remember any of my education classes that ever addressed this topic --- "How to Deal With the Grief Process."

Unfortunately, I had to face this very real tragedy when my oldest son was killed at the age of sixteen. My son's loss changed my life forever. Even though I immediately returned to the classroom after his death, I struggled on a daily basis for the next two years. I felt vulnerable and weak as a teacher. Yet I think I became more real to many of my students who saw another personal side of me. I gradually gained strength through the help from many people, but I also recognized a void within the educational field in dealing with the process of grief. I came to realize what more I could have done for those parents who had lost a child prior to my own son's untimely death. I also learned what others in the school could have done for me when I experienced this type of overwhelming grief. I believe we can't always control the struggles of hardships in our lives, but we can control the ways in which we deal with them.

As educators, we are in a profession that is solely based on building productive lives for our students. They are our future and when one is cut short, all of us are affected. Dealing with a myriad of human emotions comes with the territory of teaching, counseling, and administrating within our schools. Therefore, we must be able to relate to our students and colleagues in many difficult situations. The more we learn about real life crises, the more we benefit and are able to react in a positive and helpful manner.

The following lists are only suggestions to assist any school system in dealing with a child's death. Whether the child was a student at the school or a child of one of the faculty members, learning helpful ways in dealing with such difficult situations can aid everyone. It is a time when most of us don't know what to say or do to make things better. Even though you can never better a situation like this, you can make things different in a positive way. You can make a difference on how you react to the tragedy and what you teach to your students, and I hope it is in ways that promote growth and healing for all of those involved.

Suggestions for teachers, administrators, and counselors to help the grieving students as well as the family involved.

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- ❑ Your physical presence at the funeral and/or wake is an invaluable comfort to the grieving parents and family. If you feel uncomfortable to attend alone, then go as a group. Believe me, your presence says a great deal.
- ❑ Having some sort of student moratorium at the school can be helpful to many. My son's funeral was held at his school. The entire service was student oriented ---which included student and teacher eulogies, student choir presentations, student requested songs were played, and a student video in remembrance of our son was presented. Obviously, this choice is up to the schools and the parents, but I must say that this offered helpful closure for students as well as family and friends. It was a direct display of respect to us as a grieving family and to a student who was well liked by his friends and teachers.
- ❑ As a teacher or counselor, if you have any essays, paperwork, videos, any school work or records of the child, send them to the family. These are tangible memories of a child that a parent would appreciate and hold dear. It is a gesture of respect.
- ❑ Teachers find time for open discussion in the classroom to allow students to talk about the loss. If you feel uncomfortable with this, ask grief counselors to step in and direct the students.
- ❑ Another option for students to express their grief is to write about it. Ask the students to write their memories of the child. This can help them process their grief, and these notes could be given to the parents. When I received the myriad of notes from students who were allowed to write about my son, they were extremely comforting and helpful.
- ❑ Another physical act of expressing grief is the letting go of balloons (even notes of good-bye could be attached). This simple act of letting go helps release the grief and gives some sort of closure. This activity could be continued on certain occasions in memory of a student.
- ❑ If the child was part of your classroom, have the class create a scrapbook of memories. Then give the memory scrapbook to the bereaved family. Again this can help students deal with their own grief, and it is helpful in reaching out to the family.
- ❑ Contact a local Compassionate Friends group in your community or other grief support groups that focus on the death of children. There may be parents who have lost a child who would be willing to come in and talk about their experiences. Also, siblings who have lost a brother or sister may be asked to come in and talk about their feelings and what helped them through the grieving process. Your students need to be made aware of how families do deal with this grief. This can be invaluable to everyone. You may discover that you have students in your classroom already who were dealing with the loss of a friend or sibling and need some resource of understanding and help.
- ❑ If you don't feel the classroom is the appropriate setting for such discussions, consider creating a support group for grieving students and siblings at the school. A counselor would be useful at such meetings.
- ❑ Most schools are receptive to suggestions about creating positive ways in which to memorialize students. Memorial parks or garden areas at the school; simple donations of a tree or a bench in memory of a student; creation of an academic hall recognizing and honoring students in memory of someone; Memorial scholarships; creation of a club in memory of a student; a "memory resource" fund could be established in

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which donations could be used for future memorials, murals and other artwork are all options that could be implemented.

- ❑ As educators, try to remember the families during the very difficult times of holidays, birthdays, etc. through personal notes or other ways of contact. Try to keep the families in mind during that critical first year after the tragedy.
- ❑ Helping your colleagues deal with a tragedy such as this is also vital. I offer a few direct suggestions that became helpful to me during this continual process of grief.
- ❑ Again, try to attend the funeral and/or wake as a group or individual. Administrators, make sure you attend the funeral and/or wake. You are the leader and should be there to help direct your staff and demonstrate that you care. Perhaps, a group of teachers could send a memory tree to the bereaved colleague. Living memorials are a lasting way of remembrance and caring.
- ❑ Throughout that first year, try to remember to drop a note to your colleague and let him or her know that you are thinking of them. I remember receiving a weekly note in my mailbox from a fellow teacher that entire first year. I can't tell you how much those little notes of "thinking of you" and "take one day at a time" helped me get through each day.
- ❑ Never tell the colleague who has lost a child that he or she "should be moving on" or "getting over the grief" at any time of this process. The parent never gets his life back as it once was. Life gets very different for them; it doesn't get better. So think of ways to make life more bearable for this person.
- ❑ Grief is a very exhausting process. Perhaps, you could plan occasional meals to be delivered to your colleague's house, especially during those first few weeks after the death of the child. Finding ways in which to help relieve the stress outside of the classroom can benefit the grieving teacher immeasurably.
- ❑ This is also a time that administrators should consider offering their teachers help in contacting grief support groups. Have a list of resources of local organizations as well as a recommended reading list for such a loss. Let your faculty know that you are there for them in good and bad times.
- ❑ Perhaps, teachers could offer a "mental sick bank" for the bereaved colleague. Being able to leave school early to attend grief counseling sessions or just going home to grieve is very important during that first year. Colleagues at my school offered this to me and this gesture was a lifesaver on several occasions.
- ❑ Don't be afraid that you might upset your colleague by talking about their child or doing something in memory of him or her. You cannot upset this parent any more than he or she has already endured. In fact, one of the greatest fears a parent who has lost a child has is that people will forget their son or daughter. So, talking about their child reinforces their memory and makes that parent feel comfortable in disclosing their feelings.
- ❑ One last bit of advice I want to make is to the teacher or employee of a school who has experienced the loss of a child. I think it is imperative that you realize that you are not alone in your journey of grief and there are a myriad of experiences and emotions that you will face.

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- ❑ If you think that you do need to take some time off from work, let your principal know. Don't be afraid to ask. Be aware that your grief is very exhausting.
- ❑ Don't try to live your child's life vicariously through your students. Sometimes, it is easy to anger quickly at the mistakes of your student, and you may want to use your child's death as an example to motivate others to do better. Though this may be done with the best of intentions, don't be surprised if these emotions backfire and aren't effective.
- ❑ Don't be surprised if a colleague says something that hurts you terribly. I believe most people just don't know what to say or do to help. In turn, they often say things that are so untrue, only because they have not experienced the loss of a child. It is very different when talking to other parents who have endured a similar tragedy.
- ❑ Finding a support group of some kind can be very helpful. Whether it is a group or one individual, such as a grief counselor, consider helping yourself in this way. Also, if you have other children at home, you will need to monitor their progress in the grieving process and be aware that they are experiencing grief in different ways.
- ❑ You may have to alter your teaching style in respect to your needs and your students' needs. But in the end, do not shortchange your students in what they need. This will be a time when you may have to re-evaluate what you can and cannot do in the way of teaching.
- ❑ Try to focus on one day at a time. Grief can make your life spiral out of control, and the ability to focus and organize is difficult. Write things down; keep a journal or a list of things you have done and what you hope to get accomplished.

Keep in mind that these lists of suggestions are endless and need to be individualized. I believe that acting upon any of these ideas, however, is a direct way of teaching respect and understanding. I have been in schools where teachers were told not to mention anything about the tragedy, not to let their students discuss their feelings, and to go on with their scheduled lessons. This was decided upon in order to maintain order and normalcy. But when a child's untimely death is experienced, nothing is normal anymore. It is an unnatural process but it is one, unfortunately, that does occur. We cannot bury our heads in the proverbial sand and hope the problem goes away.

Therefore, as educators, we need to broaden our lessons of learning beyond the textbooks and recognize that grief is part of everyone's life learning process. It is times like these that will demand our flexibility, strength, and understanding as a teacher and friend. We have a lot to learn and a lot to teach about the process of grief. Growth and healing can occur if we first recognize the grief and then act upon it in positive and helpful ways.

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