

Death and the Grief Reaction Process

Suffering a serious loss in one's personal life can lead to behavioral and emotional problems and/or difficulty in academic and social skills. **One means of assisting students to overcome their sense of loss is to understand the five stages of the grief reaction process.** Every person grieves somewhat differently and there is seldom any clear cut order or pattern. One individual might move quickly from one emotion to the next while another might show only one intense emotion for a long period of time. A brief overview of each stage of grief and suggestions for helping individuals to deal with each stage are discussed next.

Denial Stage

An individual at this stage is intellectually aware that a loss has occurred but wants to believe and/or act as if the dead individual will return. A common reaction during this stage is making deals. In this case, an individual might promise God that he or she will complete all chores without complaining if the loved one can be returned. **Teachers, counselors, or others interacting with the child during the denial stage should not refute the expression of desire for the loved one's return.** Identification of the emotion expressed—"you're really missing John, aren't you?" will communicate understanding and acceptance. Working with the child on a scrapbook containing photographs or other memorabilia associated with the significant person is recommended.

Fear Stage

Tragedies that involve violence often instill fear in survivors. **Children, in particular, may fear that a similar fate may befall themselves, other family members, or close friends.** Some children may be reluctant to return to school after the funeral, fearing that family members may also die before they return home from school. Allowing the child to remain home for a few days until a more normal family routine exists is often the best cure. In cases where a classmate's death has resulted from shooting, kidnapping, and murder, providing a sense of assurance is critical to the healing process.

Anger Stage

Anger is the one emotion that survivors of loss, regardless of reason (e.g., divorce, old age, suicide, accident), universally feel. Individuals are angry at the person who has left them, perhaps at themselves for not doing something to prevent the loss, or at one or more other individuals for their perceived role in the loss. **A critical role played by general and special educators is to direct the anger into constructive activity.** Students should be taught that, while they may not be able to control the emotion they feel, they can control what they do with those feelings. Physical activities (e.g., swimming, running, dancing) and creative activities (e.g., entries in a journal, musical composition, construction with clay or other mediums) serve as positive expressions for anger.

Depression Stage

Varied behaviors ranging from crying, lethargy, and withdrawal to avoidance behaviors can indicate depression. For instance, during this stage, students tend to become class clowns and engage in self destructive behaviors like substance abuse and/or promiscuity. **Praise and nurturing are essential aspects of the recovery process.** Frequent reminders that conditions

will improve are also helpful. Even a hug or a pat on the back can let the individual know that someone cares. One of the most beneficial activities is to get the individual involved in helping others such activity tends to bolster self-esteem and put the individual in control over at least some events in his or her life.

Reorganization Stage

Most individuals progress through each of the stages just summarized within a few weeks. Some, however, are unwilling to move out of grieving for fear they will forget the individual who has died or who is no longer a part of their lives. These individuals tend to think that they need permission to continue living from a trusted person such as a family member, friend, and teacher. One means of assisting the individual to get over this reorganization hump is to suggest a ritual of farewell to end the grieving period. Some individuals can finalize this goodbye rather quickly. Others may need several weeks or months before this ritual closure can occur. **A brief summary of age-specific activities which could be employed to assist students of varying age levels to work through the grieving process. A sample for each age level is provided next:**

- **Primary Students:** Put a sad/smiley face on a flipchart and ask students to describe which feeling is associated with the face, recollect a time when they may have felt this way, and share what made them feel better.
- **Middle Level Students:** Discuss the word "grief" before a loss actually occurs. Have students provide examples of events that promote feelings of grief, describe how a person who is grieving feels, and identify ways that a person who is grieving can work through the grief process.
- **Secondary Students:** Discuss different types of loss (e.g., death, divorce, and boy/girlfriend break-up), reactions students may have experienced with regard to the loss and ways of dealing with it.

Excerpted from *Disruption, Disaster, and Death: Helping Students Deal with Crises*.