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Remote Emergency Response Team

The COVID-19 crisis requires schools to reimagine what it means to engage in collective care for students and staff experiencing grief and loss. Here are a few recommendations for schools as they move the work of their Emergency Response Team online.

Preparing your team

- School leaders convene or appoint the members of your Emergency Response Team to review, update, or design protocols and procedures.
- Seek the expertise of the guidance team and seek consultation as appropriate.
- Re-establish relationships with parents and guardians in order to:
  - Exchange current contact information
  - Assess impact of the crisis
  - Understand issues experienced by the community
    - How are families taking care of each other and their neighbors? What can you learn from their resilience?
    - How could you leverage existing resources in the community?
    - What kind of advocacy is appropriate?
- Analyze attendance and engagement data with regular frequency to identify red flags.
- Familiarize staff with protocols.
- Model professional self-care: Create a culture where it is ok to be upset, ask for help, and model willingness to accept help.

Responding to an Emergency

- Verify information across multiple sources (family, hospital, police).
- Convene Emergency Response Team in order to confirm roles, protocols, and communication strategy.
- Respect and strictly adhere to the requests and cultural norms of the family.
  - What information can be shared with the school community?
  - What are the most appropriate ways to show support?
- Use family’s preferred way of communication (eg. phone vs email, language, etc).
- Notify staff and prepare a statement to share with students.
- Review how staff should and should not engage with students and families. (See Quick Guides).
- Notify students in small groups or Crews. Use a prepared statement that communicates the same information to all students and includes information about mental health services (See Sample Crew Lesson).
  - Provide an overview or opening circle/meeting for staff so that they can ask questions or read through the grief protocol or Crew lesson prior to doing so with students.
  - Pair Crew leaders or teachers with support staff wherever possible for small group meetings. Plan for extra support for Crews that had a close relationship with the person who died.
If students work on written reflections, drawings or other activities that will be collected in Crew, remind students to include their name on the documents. If a student expresses concerning behaviors or feelings, this allows a Crew leader/counselor to follow-up.

- Bring in a team (substitutes, community providers, school counselors or social workers from neighboring schools) to provide personnel support.
  - Prepare a breakout space and access to phones/remote tools, should students ask to connect with a family member or support person.
- * Send a letter to other families in the school community.

* See sample statements for students.

Community Care and Healing

- Honor the life as a community in a meaningful, therapeutic way regularly (eg. a symbolic moment of silence at the end of Crew).
- Avoid commemorative or memorialization events that set an inequitable precedent.
- Educate staff and students in the various ways grief shows up.
- Engage all personnel (Crew leaders, nurse, social workers, psychologists, etc) to identify which students may be at high risk for emotional distress.
- Coordinate referrals to outside services through the Emergency Response Team.
- Provide a support system for staff who may also be experiencing grief. Staff are entitled to support through their employer’s Employee Assistance Program.
  - The UFT provides grief support, self-care resources and confidential phone/Zoom sessions to members during the pandemic. Email mapinfo@uft.org to schedule a session.
- Discuss support seeking and giving, as normal and critical to healing.
- Consider how to manage any triggers or reminders (eg. desk or locker).
- Engage community in multiple modalities (phone, images, video meeting, music).
- Be aware that grief, support and care are expressed in multiple ways, often guided by family, culture and religious beliefs.
- If students write letters to the family, please be sure students write their names on the letters and a staff member reads letters before they are sent.

References:

- Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff
- Supporting the Grieving Student
- Psychological First Aid for Schools
Roles

Role clarification allows staff to do their part within the scope of their responsibilities and training.

Teachers and Support Staff:

- Teachers are not expected to be grief counselors.
- Be present and attentive to grieving students as they express their feelings.
- Be prepared. During grief, it is hard to learn new information and to be able to communicate difficult news to students. Utilize resources and ask for support.
- Connect with students by asking them how they are doing and checking in on them.
- Make referrals for counseling. If you’re not sure if a student needs additional support, talk it through with the school counselor or social worker.
- Be patient with students who have trouble focusing. Continue to provide routine and regular structures. Maintaining structures lets people know you are still there.
- Recognize teachers are most likely grieving as well, but still find a way to be aware of their prime responsibility, which is to help the kids grieve while finding support for themselves.
- Recognize that it can be distressing to be a support to students who are grieving or in distress. Staff need to normalize asking for help and to find ways to ensure their personal needs are met during this time.

References:
- Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff
- Psychological First Aid for Schools

Counselors:

- Advocate for students by recommending school personnel create consistent procedures, communication and policies.
- Participate in district and school response team planning and practices and help ensure students and staff are able to process/understand crises.
- Provide interventions for students at risk and help to assess which students are in greater risk based on the crisis and circumstance.
- Provide individual and group counseling.
- Facilitate open communication between students and caring adults.
- Support student-initiated programs or resources that contribute to wellness.
- Partner with community resources.
- Defuse critical incidents and provide a space to debrief.
- Promote trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices.
- Recognize that it can be distressing to be a support to students who are grieving or in distress. Staff need to normalize asking for help and to find ways to ensure their personal needs are met during this time.

Resources:
- ASCA Safe Schools and Crisis Response
Making Referrals

Educators are encouraged to follow up with school counselors and social workers when they are concerned about a student. Teachers and sometimes peers are the first people to notice or wonder if a student needs more support. The best way to support a student is to follow up with a counselor or social worker to talk through your concerns.

Examples of some of the situations that require a referral:

• An acute medical problem that needs immediate attention
• An acute mental health problem that needs immediate attention
• Worsening of a preexisting medical, emotional or behavioral problem
• Threat of harm to self or others
• Concerns related to alcohol or drug use
• Cases involving domestic, child or elder abuse (be aware of reporting laws)
• When pastoral counseling is desired
• Ongoing difficulties with coping (four weeks or more after the event)
• Significant developmental concerns about children or adolescents
• When they ask for a referral

Resource:
  ● Psychological First Aid for Schools (page 72)

Understanding Death: preschool children, school-age children and teens

Preschool children often have a hard time understanding the concept of death and its permanence. Sometimes they need clarity that the person is no longer sleeping, eating, feeling or living anymore. Avoid adult language that confuses this concept such as “the person passed away” or euphemisms for sleep such as “they are resting in peace” or explanations such as “the person went away” as these are potentially more confusing. Young children sometimes worry about the deceased and think that they can do something to bring them back. Social workers or counselors sometimes use children’s books to explain the concept of death.

School-age children understand that death is permanent, but they do not understand how to explain the causes of death and often mistaken death for fictional characters such as monsters. Young children may also take the blame for death which is again a misunderstanding of how people die. They also tend to become fearful that other people who are close to them will die. Young children need reassurance.

Teens understand the concept of death but may grapple with larger questions of purpose, meaning of life and can lose a sense of security. Some may consider questioning their life plans and find it difficult to maintain regular routines. It's common for young people to experience the range of emotions and phases of grief that adults do, and will need support expressing themselves.
Do’s and Don’ts for Talking with Students

Most people have not received training on how to support people who are grieving. However, many students experience loss and sometimes we may not be aware of it. Conversations about death are difficult because they bring up hard feelings, and we may feel that we do not have all of the answers for children. This is a quick guide for educators. Please remember that the goal is not to take students’ pain away but to give them an opportunity to express themselves and to share information about the death in the school community.

Keep In Mind:

- Do not assume that everyone who has been through the emergency is traumatized.
- Do not make assumptions about what students and staff have experienced during the incident or are currently experiencing. People vary in their experiences with grief.
- Do not assume that all students and staff members want or need to talk to you. Being physically present in a supportive and calm way helps people cope.
- Do not “debrief” by asking for details of what happened.
- If you cannot answer a question, say so and then follow up to learn the facts.
- Do not patronize students by focusing on the individual’s weaknesses, helplessness, disability, etc. Focus instead on what the individual has done to contribute to their well-being and to others.
- Many student reactions to grief are acute and understandable. Do not pathologize by using terms like “symptoms” or “conditions” or “disorder”.

Resource:
- Psychological First Aid for Schools (page 13)

What to Say to Someone who is Grieving

Some people fear that by bringing up the topic of death, they will upset the person who is grieving. Remember that it is the death of their loved one that causes the pain. By asking people how they are doing, you make them feel seen and cared for.

Be okay with some silence and accept that the person may cry and be in pain. Listen more and talk less. Use open-ended questions. Affirm what you heard the person say to you. Remember to ask another professional for help if you need support.

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<tr>
<th>Unhelpful Statements</th>
<th>Instead Try...</th>
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<td>“I know what you are going through. I know how you feel.”</td>
<td>“It sounds like this is a really hard time and as if you are saying you may be feeling...” Or try: “I’m here for you if you want to talk.”</td>
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Everyone’s experience of grief and the circumstances surrounding it varies.
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<th>Grieving people especially children are already carrying an emotional weight and this holds them back from asking for help.</th>
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<td>“You need to be strong right now.”</td>
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<td>“How are you doing? How is your family?”</td>
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<td>“Yes, and my parents/grandparents died recently.”</td>
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<td>This can leave people feeling that their loss is not as profound in this moment.</td>
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<td>“I am so sorry for your loss. I am here to listen if you want to talk.” Or Try: “It is such a tough thing to go through something like this. I appreciate you sharing this with me.”</td>
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<td>“Everything is going to be alright” or “At Least they are not suffering” or “It will get better in time.”</td>
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<td>This can minimize the person’s experience and how they feel in the moment.</td>
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<td>“It’s common to have strong feelings when someone dies. Can you tell me how you are doing?”</td>
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<td>Avoid any references to religion.</td>
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<td>Affirm the person’s expression of grief.</td>
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Resource:
- AFT: Supporting Your Students; Coalition to Support Grieving Students: What to Say
Sample Crew Plan
This plan was adapted from Leaders High School’s Crew plan.

A. Sample Objectives:
   ● To compassionately share the news of someone’s death
   ● To provide students an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings
   ● To inform students of the supports that will be provided
   ● To identify students who may need counseling support

B. Script: Revisit Any Norms that You Hold in Crew
   ● Name norms below
   ● Introduce any guest counselors and social workers. Share that they will be with our school for today (and any additional days you are able to have them with you) to support the school community.

C. Script: Sharing Information
   ● Provide the Crew leader with a script. During a crisis, it is hard to learn, recall and communicate information. If the family has preferences for some information to be withheld, provide a clear way for the Crew leader to communicate facts that can be shared.
   ● Sample Script:
     ○ Welcome to Crew today. Before we get started, I am going to take time to share sad news with you. __________ who was in/worked with ____ grade died on ______. We want to take time today to remember __________. As a school community, we want to give you time to reflect on your feelings and to share them.
     ○ If appropriate, you can share how the person died.

Tips: Navigating Student Reactions:
   ● Some students might want to share that they had already heard the news and may wonder if others already knew. You can explain that everyone learned of the death at different times and that we want to support each other now that everyone knows today.
   ● Answer questions honestly with information you know. If you do not know an answer, it is okay to tell students that you do not know and that you can get back to them.
   ● Limit details to what you understand students can manage. If students share gruesome/harsh anecdotes, you can acknowledge that some of the details are hard to hear and redirect the group.
   ● Redirect conversations that turn from concerns to complaints.
   ● If the group is becoming more upset, you can ask them to pause and take a deep breath and redirect the group to caring for one another.
   ● Focus students on keeping a supportive group for one another.
   ● Direct students to the next activity when the group is ready.

Reference: Psychological First Aid for Schools
Tips: Possible Reactions & How to Respond

**Student:** “I don’t know who that is, it doesn’t affect me.”

**Crew Leader:** “I understand that you may not have known him, however our school community is mourning the loss of a young person that had a promising future. Remember we don’t have to know a person to feel the family and/or friends’ pain.

**Student:** “Why are we talking about this?!”

**Crew Leader:** “Death is uncomfortable and something that is difficult for most. We want to provide a space for all of you to share how you may feel about ______ and if you don’t have any current feelings or thoughts that’s okay too. If you feel uncomfortable sharing in this setting, the counseling department has set up counseling clinics with multiple counselors, or you can support your peers by listening.

Reference: Leaders High School Crew Lesson

D. Activity for Reflecting on Feelings and Coping Strategies: Choose Age-Appropriate Activities

a. **Journaling:** for all ages (can use a Google forms for remote learning)
b. **Sharing Memories:** Honoring the relationship and establishing continuing bonds
c. **Offering moments of silence**

Tips: Reflecting on Coping Strategies and Helping One Another

- Provide students with time to think about what they do when they feel sad or have strong feelings. What do they do to comfort themselves? List the people they might talk to.
- Ask students to reflect back on how others have helped them when they were sad.
- You can ask students how they think that they can help one another at this time.
- Remind students that everyone responds differently to grief.

E. Inform Students of Supports Available:

a. Inform students of when, where and how to access counseling.
b. Tell students that the best way that they can help friends who are struggling is to reach out to a counselor or come check in with you. They can also meet with the counselor together.
c. Let students know how they can reach you in the coming days.
d. If journaling, you can ask students to mark off a box or note if they want to see a counselor. If this is a remote session, you can ask students to stay on the session at the end so that you can be sure to take their name down for the counselor to follow up with them.

Tip: Not all groups will want to engage in a long conversation and that is okay.

End of Crew Sample Lesson