Navigating Grief

WHO WE ARE

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The Core Initiative provides professional development services to educators to catalyze self-discovery and enhance emotional resilience through experiential learning so that they can channel their passions into what they do best in the classroom.

(Former MSD School Psychologist)
MONTESSORI SCHOOL OF DENVER

Stephanie Flanigan, Head of School
Julie Bragdon, Assistant Head of School
Montessori School of Denver
Toddler – 8th grade
340 of Students
72 Faculty and Staff
AMS and ACIS Accredited
6 acres + tree house and very cool urban farm

I THOUGHT I COULD DESCRIBE A STATE; MAKE A MAP OF SORROW. SORROW, HOWEVER, TURNS OUT TO BE NOT A STATE BUT A PROCESS.

-C.S. Lewis
GRIEF OVERVIEW

Kübler-Ross & Kessler
- Grief is a Highly Individual, Nonlinear Process
- Grief is a Healing Process
- Grief can be an Isolating Process
- Grief can be a Transformative Process

The Mayo Clinic
- Grief is the natural reaction to loss. Individual experiences of grief vary and are influenced by the nature of the loss. Some examples of loss include the death of a loved one, the ending of an important relationship, job loss, loss through theft or the loss of independence through disability.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES
## DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES

<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
<th>Understanding of Death</th>
<th>Reactions to Death</th>
<th>Ways to Help</th>
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<td><strong>Toddler</strong></td>
<td>Death as separation, do not understand permanence of death</td>
<td>Can seem unaffected, search for deceased, irritable, clingy</td>
<td>Avoid confusing terms (Sleeping, went away, resting), help understand the person's body no longer works.</td>
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<td><strong>Primary</strong></td>
<td>Limited understanding of death, magical thinking, person may come back to life</td>
<td>May seem fine, push away caregivers, cling to strangers, restless, act younger, questions about death</td>
<td>Use simple honest language, model and explain expressions of grief, provide play and art for expressions of grief</td>
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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

TYPES OF GRIEF/LOSS YOUR SCHOOL MAY FACE

- Death of a Parent
- Death of a Child
- Death of a Staff Member
- Death of a Staff Member’s Family Member
- Death by Suicide
- Death by Violence
TWO CASE STUDIES OF PARENT DEATH

2008
Mother died unexpectedly on Valentine’s Day after complications related to a heart defect/influenza. The children were ages 3, 6 and 8 and attended our primary and lower elementary programs. Mother was heavily involved in Parent Association and broader Denver community. Parents were married. Nephews attended the school. Sister in parent community.

2016
Mother died unexpectedly due to an accident that occurred on vacation the week before school started. Children were age 2 and 5. The toddler was about to begin in our full-day toddler program and the older child was beginning her kindergarten year in our primary program. Parents were recently divorced.

WHO WILL BE ON YOUR TEAM IN A CRISIS?

- School got a call informing us of mother’s death.
- Admin gathered team. (HOS, AHOS, School Psych, Level Leads)
- How will you involve parent association leadership?
- How will you involve teachers?
- How will you involve board members?
- We selected a family liaison so the families were not being bombarded by communication from the school.
- Who is in YOUR support system?
WHAT DO YOU SAY TO STAFF MEMBERS?

The team gathered all teachers and classroom assistants in the Head’s office to share the news.

Stick to the facts. “We received a phone call [from whom if you know/want to/can share] informing us that [insert name of person] died [insert when if known].”

People are generally curious about how someone dies, especially when the deceased is younger and/or the death is unexpected. Sometimes curious people don’t get to know. Sometimes you can state something simple. (An accident on vacation, a heart problem). Sometimes you have to be intentionally vague.

In a community people want to know, but privacy still matters.

WHAT ARE THE SPHERES OF IMPACT?

- Spheres of impact are a way to map out and conceptualize who is affected by a school crisis.
- Expect that you will learn more about impact as the crisis evolves.
- You may not know how deeply affected someone is by a crisis.
  - (Consider secondary and cumulative losses, triggering other losses)
- This is an internal process subject to human interpretation.
  - Grief is not a competition.
- Can be a helpful tool as you are planning follow-up steps.
SPHERES OF IMPACT - 2008

Family of mother (primary student, lower elem student, ages 3, 6 and 8), nephews, sister

Administrators, Teachers, Parent Association Leadership, Children

Parent Community at MSD, other families

Other Independent Schools

Local charity mother was involved in, media, Denver

DEATH OF A PARENT — SPHERES OF IMPACT

The children and family of the mother (Toddler program, Primary program), maternal grandmother

MSD Family who happened to be vacationing in same place and was involved in crisis management on scene

Staff — Classroom Teachers, Assistants who had provided childcare, Children who knew the mother well

Mother’s friends and family out-of-state, professional community,

Denver — Media Coverage
WHAT RESOURCES ARE HELPFUL TO HAVE READY IN THE EVENT OF A DEATH IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Letters to your community - What does my community need to hear?
List of community-based mental health providers, grief counselors, support groups
List of books available at your school about death and dying

COMPONENTS OF LETTERS

- Provide basic facts surrounding death.
- Affirm that people may experience a range of reactions.
- Explain what will happen next.
- Offer resources about where to turn for help.
- Explain what kind of communication community can expect.

- You can find many samples online. Strike the tone that is right for your population.
LETTERS: WHOLE SCHOOL, STAFF, CLASSROOM PARENTS

RESOURCES CARD

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”
— Fred Rogers

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

Colorado Crisis Services [http://colorado-criseservices.org](http://colorado-criseservices.org)
Rocky Mountain Crisis Partners [http://www.mrcrisisservices.org](http://www.mrcrisisservices.org)

Referrals for Ongoing Counseling Support
- Dr. Katie Manil - (303) 222-8127
- Dr. Michelle Povin-Nettel - (303) 518-7566
- Beth Patterson, MA, LPC – (303) 817-8571
- Amy Fickert-Williams, MSW, LCSW – (303) 912-9808
- Dr. Michelle Novetny – (303) 617-6981
- Dr. Carly Johnson – (720) 295-6156
- Colorado Center for Clinical Excellence (Various Practitioners)
  [www.thecoloradocenter.com](http://www.thecoloradocenter.com)

If you are having a mental health crisis, please call 911
or go to the nearest emergency room.
HOW WILL YOU COMMUNICATE WITH AND SUPPORT THE BROADER SCHOOL COMMUNITY DURING THE CRISIS?

We arranged drop-in counseling for anyone (staff, parents, etc.) at the school and publicized those times.
• We offered water, snacks, chocolate in counseling space.
• We also had a lovely flowering plant.
We sent general communications to entire school community, and more targeted communications to the two classroom communities most impacted.
The team regrouped throughout the crisis and checked in with each other about needs.
Address funeral attendance
People want to DO something! (Examples: lunches, vacuuming, birthday presents, parents subs, outfits for services)

HOW WILL YOU PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT TO THE FAMILY/STAFF MEMBERS AND BROADER COMMUNITY?

• ASK THE FAMILY what would be helpful. We can have the best intentions, and people WANT to do something, but it is vital that our support fit with what the family most wants and needs.

• If a Meal Train or similar is desired, find someone to coordinate it who is not one of the key crisis team members who will be doing other heavy lifting.

• Discuss “When the casseroles stop coming…” among the staff and with the family specifically.

• Consider how you will handle special school events/holidays (Mother’s Day, “Muffins With” Events, Continuation), anniversaries, Valentine’s Day

• Consider whether you will memorialize the community member on campus. (Consider precedent, Garden)
WHAT BOOKS ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS DOES YOUR SCHOOL/CLASSROOM LIBRARY HAVE ALREADY?

There are many books that cover the topic of grief and loss.
* Lifetimes Bryan Mellonie  
* Because the Sky Is Everywhere by Nancy Sharp  
* The Invisible String by Patrice Karst  
* Remember The Secret by Elisabeth Kübler Ross  
* The Fall of Freddie The Leaf by Leo Buscaglia  
* Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins by Enid Samuel Traisman

WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE TO YOU FROM SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDERS, THE BROADER COMMUNITY? OTHER SCHOOLS AND/OR NON-PROFITS, HOSPICE CENTERS?

• Judi’s House
• Other Independent Schools
• Call your local public school district and ask who coordinates mental health support
• Call Hospice Centers
• Individual Providers who may be willing to volunteer their support
WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES AS A SCHOOL?

Remember that your primary aim is to return to business as usual as quickly and as fully as possible while remaining mindful of the needs of those most affected.

Consider your duties with regard to communication with family members. If the family is divorced, make sure you are getting parent permission before communicating with extended family but still being nurturing of the loved ones who are seeking support from the school.

All school-based mental health support is designed to be temporary, so if it feels too burdensome, remember that referring a family or staff member for community-based support is the right thing to do.

SELF-CARE AND PASTORAL CARE

It is never the responsibility of a child to meet adult needs.

Establish a school culture that is emotionally literate/supportive.

Get support. Even if you are a one-person operation from a leadership standpoint, you do not have to do this alone.

Thoughtful gifts/tokens of support for those on the front lines are very meaningful.

Healthy habits! Drink water, go for walks, eat out or eat ready made meals more. Remind others to do the same.

Give yourself and others permission to outsource things.

Don't be afraid to set boundaries.
SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Death of a Child

Death After Prolonged Illness

Suicide

Violent Death

Death of a Staff Member’s Family Member
THANK YOU FOR COMING!

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― Fred Rogers