

CRISIS RESPONSE RESOURCE MANUAL
For School Counselors and Administrators
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All schools are impacted by the realities of death, natural disasters, and even cataclysmic events at some time in their history. The Prevention/Intervention Center staff is always available to assist schools in responding to such crises, however some of the best responses come from schools where the staff have taken time to plan ahead, not only for the physical well-being of their children, but for their emotional well being as well. This manual was developed to assist schools in both planning ahead for a crisis, and responding during a crisis. This manual is not designed to take the place of the crisis response manual developed by the Safety and Security office, but rather to supplement it by providing a consistent framework for responding to the emotional needs of children and faculty at our schools in addition to physical safety issues.

I. Advanced Preparation for Any Event:

There are logistical arrangements that can assist in a smooth response to any kind of crisis. Making these arrangements at the beginning of the school year is invaluable in responding to events throughout the year.

A. Develop a staff phone tree/messaging system.

Deaths and accidents often occur on weekends or during the evening. Having ready access to a staff phone tree will allow the administrator to contact all of the faculty members prior to returning to school, and give the details of the event and where and when staff should gather in the morning for a briefing on the school's response plan.

B. Identify a Location and Keep Supplies on Hand for a Care Center.

Care centers are locations where grieving students can come for emotional support. School counselor offices are usually too small for large groups of students. Identifying other potential locations such as group rooms, conference rooms, and empty classrooms ahead of time and making sure that they are stocked (or the counselor's office is stocked) with plenty of tissue and comfortable chairs is important. Paper bags are helpful in case a child hyperventilates. A stack of passes to return to class should be on hand as well. An optional but welcome addition is to have refreshments available for students and counselors. Grief is hard work and takes a lot of energy. Providing water will prevent people from becoming dehydrated or faint. (Note: PTA's often want to assist in the event of a crisis, and asking them to supply refreshments is a great way to involve them in the healing process.)

C. Prepare a List of the Home/Cell Phone Numbers of Support Personnel.

If a death or accident impacts a large percentage of the schools' population, the school counselors will need additional support. Make sure to keep the cell phone number of the Coordinator of the Prevention/Intervention Center, as he/she can activate the crisis response team to get additional support for your school in the event of a crisis.

II. Responding to Deaths or Accidents Involving Individual Students

A. Designate a Media Contact

Local news stations will often contact a school if a student dies or is seriously injured in an accident. Determine ahead of time who will take such calls. In the event of a large scale disaster, the school district communications specialist will likely handle all media requests, however with small scale events the local principal may interface with the media. It's always a good idea to check in with the Communications Department on how this should be handled.

B. Confirm and Prepare a Written Statement Regarding the Facts of the Death or Accident.

Prior to giving out any information regarding the circumstances regarding the death of a child or faculty member, make sure the child's family or the police have verified the cause of death. Releasing inaccurate information can be further traumatic to the family, especially in situations that appear to be a suicide, but later turn out to be accidental. If details are missing or cannot be confirmed, staff should indicate that the cause of death is unclear at this time. The statement can then be read by individual teachers in the classroom, or by counselors that come into the class. Include information on funeral arrangements if it is available and any way students/staff can help the family through donations, etc. Also include information regarding the location of the care centers so that teachers know where to send upset students.

Make sure the front office staff has a copy of the fact sheet, as concerned parents will often flood the front office with phone calls. Having a prepared statement will reduce rumors and ease parental concerns.

C. Hold a Faculty Meeting Prior to The Beginning of the School Day, And at the End of the Day

During the morning faculty meeting the Principal or designee should again share the information about the death/accident, and pass out information sheets to each teacher. S/He should also introduce any extra counselors or support staff available, and give the location of the care centers. Individual teachers can then share the information with their class first thing in the morning. **It is rarely a good idea to announce the death over the loud speaker, as this can cause hysteria and a large exodus from class.** If individual teachers are uncomfortable sharing the information, they should be assigned a support person (school counselor, PI Center staff member) to come to their class and share the information. In addition, classes expecting to be greatly impacted should have a counselor accompany the teacher. Recognize that many teachers may be grieving, and make counselors available to the staff as well.

Occasionally the student or faculty member's death is expected to have little impact outside of their own classes, for example: a self-contained child, a young elementary school child, a new student, or a child or faculty member who has been out for a long time due to illness. In such situations the school counselor or support staff may just follow the class schedule of the student and share the details with the impacted classes, rather than have all teachers share the information with their first period class.

The faculty should plan to meet again briefly at the end of the day to discuss how the day went, and determine if there are additional support needs for the next day.

D. Care Center Procedures

It is helpful to have some guidelines for overseeing the care of students in the care centers. A good rule of thumb is to have two counselors assigned to each group. This is especially helpful for volunteer counselors who will not be familiar with the students in their group. If someone needs to be removed, another adult will still be available to the group. It is also important not to let the group get too large – twelve students should be the maximum (space permitting). Other students that come in should be directed to a new group. It may be necessary to have several group rooms available.

Have each student sign in when they come to the care center. This will help keep tabs on who was seen, and can be checked to identify students who have not been seen by the end of the day but probably need to be seen. Other students are a great source of information. In addition to asking teachers who they are concerned about, ask students to identify other students who may have been heavily impacted, but are unlikely to come to the care center. Keep a list, and a counselor can check in with these students individually if necessary.

Students should be encouraged to return to class after spending an hour or so in the care center. Let them know that they can return later if they are having a tough time. Students who are so overcome with grief that they cannot function at school will need to have a parent come pick them up. An intervention can be accessed through the Coalition of Treatment Providers if a student appears to be extremely overwhelmed, suicidal, or self-destructive. Try to arrange a lunch break or have food brought in for the counselors. The staff is often so busy talking to students that they do not have a chance to eat.

E. Talking to Students about Death and Grief

Children and adolescents have very different developmental issues that come into play when talking about death. Appendix B has a variety of resources to utilize when talking to students about grief based on their age level.

F. Prepare a letter to Send Home with the Students.

Work on a letter to send home with the students (see sample letter in the appendix.) This letter should include:

- What happened
- What the children have been told
- Funeral arrangements, if known
- Emotional responses parents may see in their children
- Suggestions on how to help their child
- Resources

G. Other Tips for Responding with Care

- Arrange for a staff member to remove the contents of the deceased student's locker (where applicable) so that they can be returned to the family.
- Do not remove the deceased student's desk or rearrange the seating without having a class discussion first – hurt feelings may result. Discuss options with the class and decide together how to handle the empty chair.
- Adolescents often wish to have the flag lowered to half-mast, or some other visible memorial for the student who died. Remember that whatever you do is setting a precedent that you may not wish to continue for all students in all situations (for example, suicide.) Also remember that trees planted to memorialize a student sometimes die, which may further upset the school community. Many schools have found it helpful to establish a memorial garden or park area where stones and inscriptions can be added for students who are deceased, or encourage a group service project/donation in memory of the deceased.

Guidelines for Facilitating/Debriefing Small Groups.

Introductory Phase

- Arrange people in a circle to facilitate processing, if feasible
- Introduce self, clarify role
- Set Ground rules (issues of confidentiality, voluntary participation)
- Establish an environment of safety

Fact Phase

- Each individual introduces self and shares:
 1. What they heard about the death
 2. Where they heard it
 3. What their relationship to the deceased was
- Goal is to recreate the experience; reframe and correct misinformation
- The reality of a complex meaningful event is being described by many eyes
- Task definition: establish an experience of competence, and eliminate rumors.

Feeling Phase

- Facilitator begins asking “feeling” oriented questions
 1. What is the worst thing about this for you?
 2. How did you feel when it happened?
 3. How are you feeling now?
- Emotional responses are acknowledged, standardized, normalized
- Provide a forum to discuss fears, anxieties, concerns
- Task Definition: Group has moved from task oriented to process oriented

- Allow spontaneity of interpersonal support

Symptoms

- Facilitator focuses on issues related to the impact of the event
- Raises questions such as:
 1. How is this affecting you physically and emotionally?
 2. What unusual things did you experience at the time of the event?
 3. What unusual things are you experiencing now?
- Explore common symptoms experienced
- Task Definition:
 - normalization of experience
 - establishing commonality
 - process of reframing and refocusing

Teaching Phase

- Educate the group re: common stress response; discuss symptoms
- Teach about the physiology of stress
- Present strategies for alleviating stress response
- Task Definition: establish normalcy and adaptability of stress responses
- Provide support and direction

Summary

- Facilitator attempts to:
 1. Wrap up loose ends
 2. Answer outstanding questions
 3. Provide reassurances
- Emphasize role of communication
- Encourage use of Support Systems
- Suggest Plans of Action (memorials, plaques, scholarship fund, commemorative activities)
- Task Definition: Acknowledge competence of group experience

Community Debriefing After Trauma

Separate the children from the adults, as parents will not speak freely in front of children if they feel they have to be strong. Pass out index cards so people who wish to remain anonymous with their questions can do so. Have a facilitator as well as a “floater” who can assist if someone needs to leave or needs tissue, etc.

1. Express your condolences to the group.
2. Explain some general guidelines for the debriefing. Explain that physical outbursts will not be allowed, however they can excuse themselves if they are having difficulty and someone will check in with them.
3. Have group members share where they were and how they felt when they found out about the incident.

4. Provide education on the different feelings they may experience, and physical changes such as eating and sleeping difficulties. Normalize feelings, but encourage taking care of oneself physically.
5. Explain memory triggers (for example: anniversaries, birthdays, news reports) and how they may be impacted by such events.
6. Ask members to share why they think the event happened.
7. If it is a very large group have them write down questions and pass them to the front.
8. Reassure them that it is not their fault.
9. Share community resources that are available

What Helps People after a Traumatic Event?

- **Water** – helps avoid dehydration
- **Exercise/Stretching**
- **Talking**
- **Tears**
- **Accurate Information**
- **Choices** – reestablish a sense of control. Do you want to sit or stand?
- **Group Debriefing**
- **Anchoring** – “this is where you can come if you need any assistance.”

Appendix A: Crisis Response Team Checklist – Jeff Dess
Creating the plan collaboratively with the school

The following items should be discussed with the Principal and school leadership before the staff meeting:

1. Confirmation on cause of death
2. Social media challenges
3. A school designee to reach out to the family
4. What we are able or not able to say based on conversations with:
 - Family
 - District
 - Law Enforcement
 - Media
5. Parent/Guardian letter regarding the death/crisis
6. Circumstances regarding the death of student or staff
7. Notification by phone for a particular class or group
8. Locker/Desk/possessions
9. Will all classes be notified of the death/crisis or just select classes/grade levels?
10. Written out script for teachers (notification and talking points)
11. Opportunity for teachers to request assistance if not comfortable sharing the script
12. Care center locations for students *and* staff
13. Supplies for care centers and impacted classes: tissue, water, art supplies, and play-doh if available
14. Plan for following the student's schedule so that counselors (school and/or CRT) visit each class
15. Estimate on the number of CRT members needed for support
16. Planning for extra subs (if needed)
17. Planning for extra nurses (if needed)
18. Partners in ED/PTSA (food for staff during planning times)
19. Will we meet with youth leaders and Club/Activity leadership (if applicable) before students are told?
20. Survivor guilt possibility for both students and staff
21. Moment of silence announcement for student/staff member death (AFTER impacted students/staff have been notified)

AM/PM Staff Meeting- Mini Debrief -Best case/Worst case

Dealing with the initial shock

22. Share the plan for the day and locations of care centers
23. Rumors/social media challenges
24. Siblings/involvement/relationships

25. Identifying students and staff who may need extra support
26. Taking care of one-self and each other
- 27. Opportunity for staff to share questions/concerns**
- 28. Follow up and possible end of day staff meeting to debrief**

Appendix B: Sample Letter to Send Home

Dear Parents:

I regret to inform you of the death of a child who attended our school.

Jane Doe, a fourth grader, was suddenly killed by a car as she stepped off the school bus.

When we learned of Jane Doe's death, we decided to share this information with the children. It was important for all the children to have the same information to avoid rumors, which start so quickly. The facts were written down for each teacher to read to the class. Counselors and the Prevention/Intervention Center crisis team were on hand to visit each class, offering the children a time to talk and to share feelings. Children who were most upset were taken aside for individual or small group discussion. Ongoing grief and loss groups will be formed to give some of the children more time to adjust to this tragedy.

The funeral arrangements are as follows:

Cards and letters may be sent to her family at:

Our plans for a school memorial are:

Your child may experience grief, and you may see some of the following emotions.

- Tearfulness
- Bad Dreams
- Irritability
- Clinging to you
- Whiney moods
- Physical Complaints – stomach aches, head aches, etc.
- Inability to concentrate
- A temporary dip in grades
- More pronounced fears of dying, of the dark, of you dying, of walking home alone, etc.
- Regressive behaviors such as reverting to thumb sucking, bed-wetting, etc.

Listed below are some ideas that can help your child with grieving:

- Read a book on grief together.
- Let your child talk about the death or draw pictures of what he or she felt happened.
- Let them express their feelings.
- Offer them loving, touching support.
- Allow them to be sad and to cry.
- Let your child ask questions and answer them as simply as you can. If you need to, it's okay to say; "I don't know how to answer that. Perhaps we can find someone who can help us.
- Reassure your child you are healthy, you are careful when you drive, and you will be around for a long time.
- Explain the ritual of funerals and allow their participation.

- Offer support and structure in completing homework.

If there are any questions or concerns about your child's behavior, please call on the following:

Sincerely,

Principal / School Counselor

Appendix C: Sample Script for Teachers

Information for students (When cause of death is not confirmed.)

I am very sorry to share with you that we have some very sad news impacting our school community. We were notified yesterday that a ____grade student, _____ has died.

It's normal to feel shocked, sad, and even angry when someone we know dies. Even if you did not know _____ you may be feeling upset or sad as it can remind you of other losses.

Please be especially caring and supportive to one another today and know that you may see some students and adults crying today. This is a normal part of grief. There will also be some extra adults in the building to help.

Do any of you have any ideas of things we can do to support her family? (examples: make cards or send notes.)

Do any of you have any ideas of what we can do to help support each other during this difficult time? (Listen, be supportive, give hugs)

If you need someone to talk to we will have extra counselors available in a Care Center so just let me or your other teachers know.

*If students ask about the cause of death let them know that we do not have that information yet. You can ask what they have heard, and mention that we have heard that too. If you feel comfortable talking about grief and loss it is okay to allow students to share other losses they have experienced and what helped them get through the difficult times.

****If cause of death is known and confirmed, share the information in the script and process any “teachable moments” available from the cause of death, i.e. wearing seatbelts, driving speed limit, getting help for mental health/substance use issues as they are treatable diseases. Be careful not to blame. Offer messages of hope, help and support.**