

Building a Grief-Sensitive Community Webinar

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National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement

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Coalition to Support Grieving Students

www.grievingstudents.org



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Many Types of Losses During the Pandemic

Death of family members & neighbors

Financial security & quality of life

Experiences & Activities

- time with friends
- classroom instruction
- vacations, travel
- participation in sports, theater, restaurants, concerts, religious services...

Events / Milestones

- graduations, birthdays, anniversaries...

Social & Emotional Learning

Safety & Security

Unique Stressors during the Coronavirus Pandemic

- Hexagon Frequent hand washing & sanitizing
- Hexagon Protective gear when leaving home, shopping...
- Hexagon Medical tests for the virus or antibodies
- Hexagon Distal/remote learning
- Hexagon Eye & neck strain from computer use
- Hexagon Changed sleep, eating & family routines
- Hexagon Exercise difficulties due to loss of access to health clubs & recreational sites
- Hexagon Physical distancing & isolation
- Hexagon Opening of only “essential” business
- Hexagon Food and supply shortages
- Hexagon Being together with family members all the time

Worries about the Future Due to the Pandemic



Will I or my family members or friends get sick?



When will a vaccine or cure be found?



Will society ever return to normal?



Will the economy recover?



What about the future of my retirement funds/plans?



Will our children's future be harmed?



Will I be able to transition back from working at home?



How will my work performance be judged?

Grief Is Different for Each Child Based on...

- Personal relationship or perceived connection with the deceased
- Prior experience with loss
- Age and level of understanding about death
- Preexisting coping mechanisms
- Method of expressing strong emotions
- Available support systems
- Level of empathy for the needs of others



Cultural Sensitivity

- Remember that the fundamental experience of grief is universal
- Ask questions
- Ask openly when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual
- Watch out for assumptions
- Be empathic, thoughtful and sensitive



Reactions of Children to Loss

- ✓ Little or No Reaction
- ✓ Nonverbal Communication
- ✓ Anger
- ✓ Risky Behaviors
- ✓ Preexisting learning, emotional, or behavioral challenges may resurface or worsen
- ✓ Acting Younger

Guilt is Very Common After a Death...

- When something bad happens, children often assume they have caused the problem by acting badly
- Children may worry that they will repeat their bad behavior & cause the death of someone else

Guilt is More Likely When...

- The preexisting relationship with the person who died was ambivalent or conflicted
- A death is preceded by a lengthy illness
- There may be some logical reason to experience guilt feelings



Shame Can Be Experienced when Children Believe

- Their questions or comments about the deceased make a family member or adult upset.
- The person who died did something wrong that resulted in his or her death



Supporting Children with Guilt and Shame

- Discuss guilt and shame explicitly with grieving children
- Ask about the kinds of thoughts, questions, or feelings they have been having
- Describe the kinds of reactions related to guilt and shame that people often have
- Normalize the experience of guilt and shame while creating a safe environment
- Talk to a school mental health professional if these emotions are persistent or causing marked distress

Impact on Learning



- Difficulty concentrating and distractibility
- Limitations in learning and/or remembering new facts or concepts
- Failing to hand in assignments or study for exams because of reduced family supervision
- Preexisting learning challenges become worse

Offer Academic Support Proactively

- Change an assignment
- Change the focus or timing of a lesson
- Reschedule or adapt tests



Grief Over Time

- **Grief proceeds on its own terms**
- **As children grow and develop, even normative transitions and changes in their lives will remind them of the loss**
- **As children develop, they become more capable of understanding and adjusting to their loss**
- **Children experience grief differently over time, and often revisit deep feelings at special events and times of transition**

Barriers for Children in Talking About Loss



Children may...

- **Conclude they have done something wrong by talking about death and avoid raising the subject again**
- **Hold in their feelings as a way to support their family**
- **Try to look fine and reassure family they are okay when they really need support**
- **Not fully understand death and loss**
- **Have problems expressing their complicated feelings**
- **Feel overwhelmed by the experience and their strong feelings**

How to Act



- Be present and authentic
- Listen more, talk less
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” students or their families
- Accept expressions of emotion
- Show empathy
- Don’t be afraid to show emotions
- Step in to stop harmful behaviors when safety is a concern

Initiating the Conversation



- Express concern
- Be genuine
- Invite the conversation
- Listen and observe
- Limit personal sharing
- Offer practical advice
- Offer reassurance
- Maintain contact

What not to say...

Don't Say This	Say this instead
"I know just what you're going through."	"Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?"
"You must be incredibly angry."	"Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?"
"This is hard. But it's important to remember the good things in life, too."	"What kinds of memories do you have about your sister?"
"At least he's no longer in pain."	"What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your father died?"

Don't Say this	Say this instead
"I lost both my parents when I was your age."	"Tell me more about what this has been like for you."
"You'll need to be strong now for your family. It's important to get a grip on your feelings."	"How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?"
"My cousin died last week. I know how you must be feeling."	"I know how I've felt when someone I loved died, but I don't really know how you're feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?"

Grief Triggers

- Hearing a song or seeing a TV show
- Special occasions
- Transitions
- Lost opportunities



Preparing Students to Manage Grief Triggers

- Identify a safe space or location where the student can go
- Provide the child with an adult he or she can see when feeling upset or wishing to talk
- Set up procedures that allow the student to obtain support
- Allow the child to call a parent or family member
- Give permission and encouragement for the child to speak with other school staff
- Offer private time to talk over feelings, questions, or other concerns



Anticipate & Minimize Triggers



- Expect that triggers may occur around holidays, Mother's Day and Father's Day, the child's birthday, the birthday of the deceased, or the anniversary of the person's death
- Introduce class activities in a way that acknowledges absences and offers alternatives
- Make an effort to reach out to grieving students at school events where the absence of a loved one may be especially noticeable
- Introduce subjects such as serious illness, accidental death, war, or violence with sensitivity

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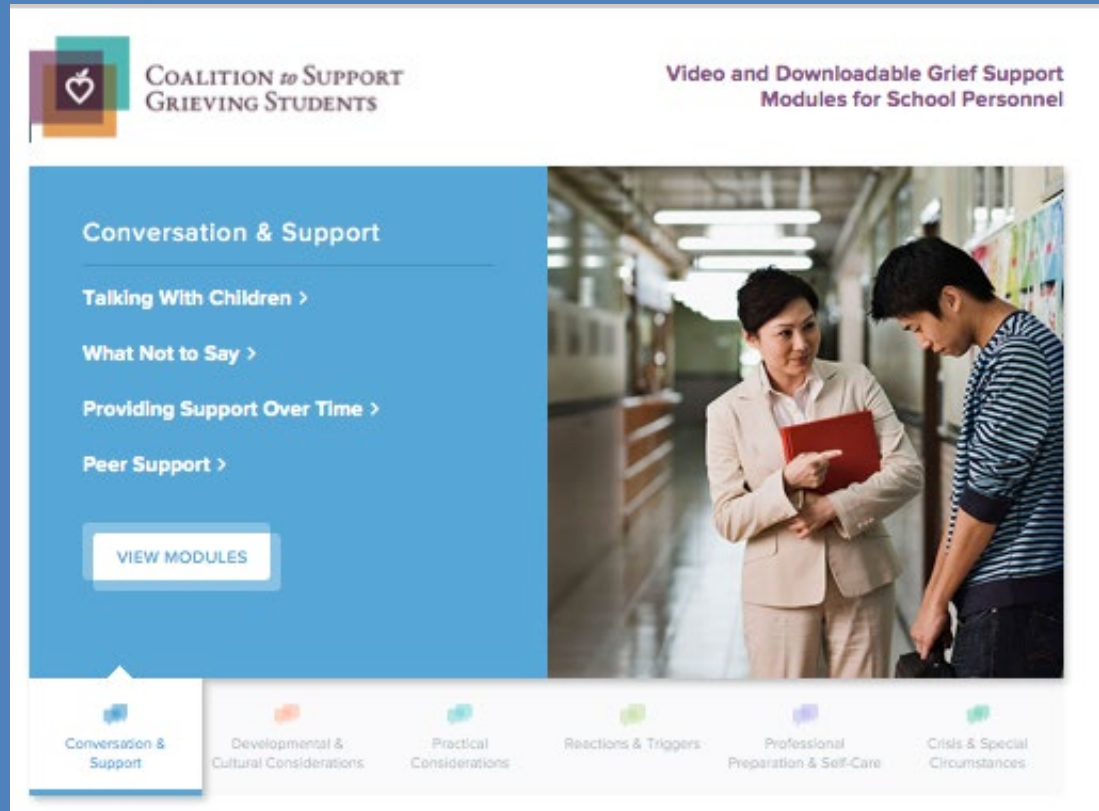
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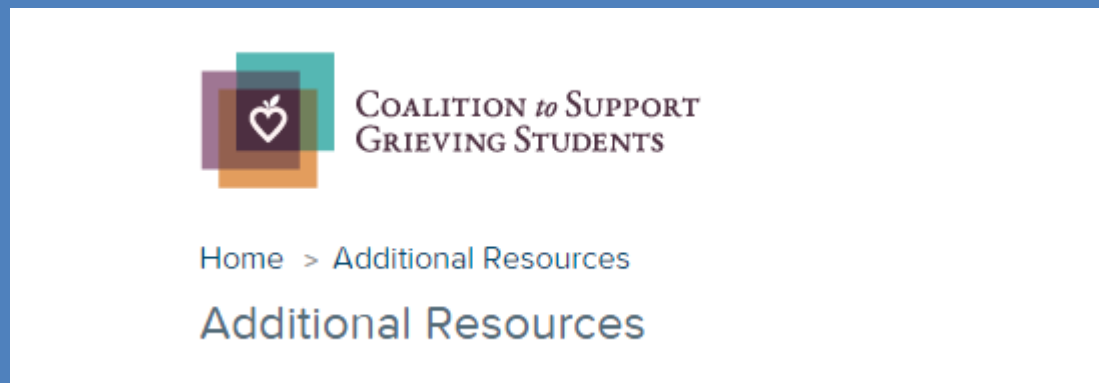
Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic – A guide to using the Coalition to Support Grieving Students materials



www.grievingstudents.org



* Six topic sections contain 2 - 4 video modules with each video accompanied by downloadable handouts that summarize the major points covered.



* Links to additional resources for schools and families



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