

Classmate Tragedy

The following section is designed to assist the teacher or counselor in preparing the class to help a student who has experienced a tragedy prior to their return to the class.

Example: Death of a friend or family member

- Explain what is known of the loss
- Ask if other students have experienced the death of a friend or family member?
- Are there things people said or did that made you feel better?
- How do you think our classmate might be feeling?
- What could you say that might help him/her know you care? Guide students' responses towards helpful comments and away from less helpful comments.
- What would you want someone to say to you if you experienced the death of someone close?
- Are there things you could do that may help them feel better?
- We can take our cues from the person that will guide our actions. What might some of those cues be?

When A Grieving Classmate Returns (First Words):

- The classmate probably feels like he/she is from a different planet when returning to school
- At least say, "hello," "welcome back," "I'm glad to see you," or something similar
- The brave might even say: "I missed you," "I'm so sorry to hear about your ___'s death."
- Even braver friends might make statements like, "It must be incredibly tough to have your ___ die."
- Other options include: write a brief note or card, call, etc.
- If your classmate cries, that is okay; you did not cause the grief; offer comfort and a tissue

Helping the Classmate Adjust to the Class:

- Offer to provide past notes from missed classes
- Offer to provide notes for comparison for the next week or so (your classmate's attention span will probably vary for several weeks)
- Give the classmate your phone number to call if having problems with homework
- Ask your classmate if you can call to check on how homework is going
- Offer to study together in person or over the phone; this might help with both motivation and with concentration; grieving students frequently do not feel like doing school work

Some Don'ts:

- Don't shun the student, speak to them
- No cliché statements (e.g., "I know how you feel" when nobody knows the unique relationship the classmate had with the deceased)
- Don't expect the person to snap back into their "old self"
- Don't be surprised if classmate seems unaffected by the loss, everybody has his/her own way of grieving
- Don't process the event in a classroom environment
- Don't say you will be okay
- Don't be afraid to ask appropriate questions about the deceased, like "what did you and your ___ enjoy together?" (people often like to talk about the people they grieve)
- Just because the classmate may seem to be adjusting to school again, don't assume the grieving has stopped, nor the need for comfort and friendship there is no time table