

Supporting Grieving Students

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Loss has always inserted itself into teaching and learning environments, but perhaps never so directly or pervasively as throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study conducted by the New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers surveying 675 educators in the summer of 2020, 26% reported that a COVID-related death had already occurred in their school community, 95% expressed a desire to “do more to support grieving students”—yet only 15% felt “very comfortable” doing so.

You may find yourself reflected in these data.

It’s no secret that grief and loss are challenging to talk about. Because Western society creates and perpetuates a culture of avoidance surrounding issues of mortality and suffering, and because avoidance is an adaptive coping mechanism that many of us utilize when grappling with individual or community trauma, we often experience discomfort when we encounter grief, whether our own, or that of a friend, family member, colleague, or student, no matter how much we may want to support them. What should we say or do, or not say or do, in such a moment? As educators, what is our role, and what isn’t? How can we be most helpful while safeguarding our own emotional wellbeing during a time of tremendous stress?

Teachers are not trained psychological professionals and should not have the same responsibilities as a school psychologist or therapist. Much research has been conducted on the unpaid emotional labor placed upon teachers, especially those who identify and present as female, as well as how that labor can lead to vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and eventual burnout.

And yet many teachers agree, as reflected by recent data, that we need more tools for supporting students grappling with grief—and it seems, intuitively, that building our grief support toolboxes will, in turn, lessen our own stress responses when we inevitably confront loss in classrooms and caring relationships at school.

What is Grief?

One way to enter this work is to understand that grief is a neurological process that happens in response to a number of losses, not only those related to a death. COVID-19 has underscored this truth, with 84% of surveyed teachers reporting that the pandemic has “made them more aware of the impact of ‘non-death related losses’ on the students they serve.”

Categories of loss that you might recognize from your own life or classroom include:

LIVING LOSSES

Living losses refers to departures, absences, or separations that create a grief-response in our brains and bodies even though they don't involve the death of a person. For example, a student whose mother is serving in the military, whose sibling is incarcerated, whose parents are getting divorced, who is estranged from a relative, or disconnected from key caretakers due to COVID-19, may all experience grief and/or trauma responses that are as legitimate as those experienced after the death of a loved one.

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

A person might experience disenfranchised grief—forms of grief and loss that are not socially or societally acknowledged—over a miscarriage, a move, a break-up, a loss of health or ability, or even a loss that they are not directly connected to like one that occurs within a schooling community. Because these types of losses are societally silenced and often stigmatized, they typically involve added stress and social discomfort.

SECONDARY LOSSES

Secondary losses occur as “collateral damage” in the wake of an overarching death, tragedy, or loss, and, similar to living losses, don't always involve the absence of a person. For example, after a parent dies, a student may be forced to contend with a change in housing or schooling, a familial falling out that leaves relatives and support systems astray, or a shift in socioeconomic status that disrupts that student's home environment. These layers of loss are connected to but separate from the primary loss. They complexify the social-emotional and potentially traumatic effects of that loss and may position students for increased behavioral and/or cognitive challenges in the classroom.

DEATH-RELATED LOSSES

Perhaps the most readily recognizable, death-related losses elicit grief connected with the physical loss of a person. When we lose someone we care about, the loss impacts attachment and reward centers within our brain; our grief is both emotional and physical.

The image shows a book cover on the left and a promotional graphic on the right. The book cover, titled "Learning from Loss" by Brittany R. Collins, features a blue and green butterfly illustration and the text "Trauma-Informed Approach to Supporting Grieving Students". The promotional graphic includes a green button that says "Download PDF: Strategies to Help Grieving Students" and a blue banner with the text "How Can I Help Grieving Students? Brittany R. Collins". Below the banner is a preview of the PDF content, which includes a quote from Dr. David Schonfeld: "Having a set of strategies to turn to when confronting loss in school helps us stay grounded and tuned-in, better serving students and ourselves by using the path to support and ensuring that we don't invalidate students' experiences or miss critical opportunities to bolster their adaptation and resilience by turning out of discomfort, to avoidance. Some strategies to keep in mind when you encounter grief in your learning environment include: Name the loss(es)..."

These and other forms of loss are not only emotional but biological experiences that have the capacity to change our behaviors, no matter how old we are. Grief involves a fight, flight, or freeze response that we also see in response to trauma, as well as a depressive response; combined, the two can wreak havoc on our minds and bodies, not to mention our capacity for engaging cognitively in the classroom.