

Guidelines for Conducting Group Intervention/Debriefing

When a death or tragic event affects an entire group of students, such as a classroom, effective intervention can be provided in a group situation. Group intervention, also known as debriefing, is basically structured group discussion. The purpose is to develop understanding and increase feelings of personal control among students, while maintaining cohesiveness. While group interventions vary depending on the group and situation, they follow five sequential steps.

1) Introduction:

The introduction sets the tone for the session. Talking about death/tragic events is difficult, and the group needs to feel secure and respected. The leader needs to complete the following:

- a) The reason for the group (e.g. death of a student/teacher),
- b) Expectations in terms of the format and sequence of events in the group, and
- c) outline the rules for group participation.

General rules may include the following confidentiality “what’s said in here stays in here”, non-judgmental listening “no put downs”, opportunity express verbal feelings or not to share, no interrupting, and to speak only for yourself. If the group intervention occurs in a classroom setting, often it is helpful to have the students sit in a circle. In some situations, it may be necessary for the school to set up an additional room, specifically designated for group intervention.

2) Facts:

The next step is for the group to understand the facts, and realize that they are not alone in this experience. In order to decrease the compounding effect on any rumours and alleviate any misconceptions, the school Crisis Team often provides a fact sheet/script for the leader. The leader needs to complete the following:

- a) allow students to explore and reach agreement on the facts,
- b) allow each student several opportunities to describe the death/tragic event from their own perspective, and
- c) guide discussion so that the students realize that they were similarly affected and have a shared perspective.

3) Feelings:

Once the facts have been established, the students are encouraged to explore their feelings in a supportive context. The leader needs to complete the following:

- a) allow each student several opportunities to share or not share their feelings about the death,
- b) begin with feelings they experienced when they heard of the death/tragic event, and move to what feelings they have right now,
- c) remind the group that it is their job to listen in a supportive and caring manner.

4) Teaching:

It is important for the group to learn that it is normal to experience differing emotions, and that their own personal experiences/feelings are also normal. The leader needs to complete the following:

- a) provide information regarding normal reactions to the death/tragic event, and anticipated reactions later,
- b) validate personal experiences, and
- c) provide information regarding further personal counselling support and how to obtain them (e.g. available crisis counsellors, the school psychologist, guidance counsellor, and a specific designated area for individualized supports etc.).

5) Closure:

Group interventions can be a very powerful and affirming experience for participants. The leader needs to complete the following:

- a) allow each student to summarize or make the final comments, in conjunction with the group, develop a plan of action for the class in order to regain a feeling of at least partial control over the fate (see section on Suggestions for Classroom Activities),
- b) Offer the possibility of further discussion at a later date on an individual of group basis,
- c) if a school letter is being sent home to inform the parents/guardians concerning the death, tell students that it is being written, and
- d) try to resume some form of normal routine at the end of the session/day. While most of the group will likely be able to resume some form of normal routine, it is essential that the leader identify any group participant that may require more intensive support to the crisis team for further follow-up.

Schools may wish to provide a copy of this outline to group leaders.