

School Bereavement Responses

It may be appropriate for the school to plan a response to a death within the school community. Particular sensitivity needs to be exercised with respect to the deceased's/survivor's cultural and religious background. The response could take several forms such as:

- attendance at the funeral
- school assembly (not recommended for death by suicide)
- lower flag
- moment of silence
- yearbook recognition
- awards
- memorial fund
- donation/flowers
- memory book for the family

Components of a School Memorial Service

The memorial service or address is intended to focus on the value of the life lived and to provide factual information.

The components in a memorial address may be:

1. Explanation that this is a special address regarding the death of a member of your school community. The address should be brief with a minute of silence observed at the end.
2. Clarification of facts: name, age, grade level, date and manner of death. If the manner of death is being investigated (i.e. murder, suicide), consult with the police regarding what can be shared.
3. Background of the student: names of schools recently attended, extra-curricular activities, hobbies, favourite subjects, part time jobs, etc.
4. Personal remarks: Relay some of the positive remarks of staff/students. The deceased will always be remembered – if there is no personal information, speak in general terms about the loss of a young life and the value of the brief time spent together. Invite the student body to participate in memorial activities (i.e. creation of a visual display, assembly, etc.).
5. Concluding Remarks: Recognize the emotions arising from the situation, the need to support one another, the “normalcy” of grief responses (i.e. tears), the importance of recognizing the value of the person's life. End by giving factual funeral arrangement information and request that all stand for a minute's silence in the deceased memory.

Sometimes it is appropriate to bring the students and staff together at a later date to recognize the deceased person's importance to the school community. This is a form of ritual that allows for grieving to take its natural course. While a memorial service is not a must, it benefits the staff and students as it gives them a chance to remember and share their grief. In general, a memorial service is a celebration of life that acknowledges our sadness of having a life end.

Planning efforts should consider the following:

- It is important to remember that the wishes of the bereaved family must be respected at all times.
- Check with the family concerning the appropriateness, type and format of the service.
- Invite the family of the deceased to the service,
- Consider the need to send a typed copy of the service to the family, with an accompanying letter of sympathy.
- Be culturally aware and sensitive. It may be necessary to consult school division community liaison officers/workers, or other knowledgeable community personnel.
- Obtain input from the school staff, student body, support staff and community.
- Determine level of student involvement during the service.
- Consider inviting other people within the school, division, and community: school support staff, parent councils, school trustees and superintendents, and other appropriate guests.
- Collect remembrances of the deceased which can be shared with the audience: visuals, anecdotes, testimonials, etc.
- Avoid holding the service at the end of the day and immediately releasing a school full of emotionally charged students. After the memorial service, the students should be brought back to their classrooms to discuss their reactions and feelings. Time should be allowed for comfort and transition.

The Crisis Response Team should consider the following:

- Provide an opportunity for students to be with their classmates and teacher immediately after the service. This helps bring closure to the death and prepares the students for their normal routine the next day.
- Arrange for appropriate counselling supports to assist students, staff, and family.
- Verbally acknowledge and thank those individuals who offered their assistance to the school, and follow-up with written acknowledgement.
- Debrief with school and Crises Response Team, as required.
- Arranges a date for postvention measures

Postvention/Evaluation

General Guidelines:

It is impossible to predict the length of a long term reaction to a tragic event. A few weeks after the crisis is over, there may be some students and staff who will be affected deeply and will need continued support or counselling. However, for most of the school, life will be back to normal. During this time period, the Crisis Response team needs to organize a meeting to discuss current supports in place and the general effectiveness of the plan. The following may be used as a guideline:

- Ensure those people deeply affected are receiving continued support.
- Remember that certain things may trigger an intense reaction after the crisis (e.g. birthdates of the deceased and of the grievers)
- Obtain feedback from various people involved in the response effort, prior to the postvention evaluation meeting.
- Determine what worked well and what didn't and make changes accordingly.
- Identify and implement modifications needed in the plan.
- Thank and give feedback to those who helped the school cope with the crisis.

