# Grief

## Supporting Students and Educators through Grief and Loss

**REACH**

Recognizing. Educating. Adapting. Connecting. Helping.

SEPTEMBER

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**When students entered their classrooms this Fall, whether onsite or virtually, they carried with them a tremendous amount of loss. Our educators, whether new to the classroom or equipped with decades of experience, are navigating the loss of predictability and a disconnect from routine. Our school communities, no matter how the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism have impacted them, are dealing with loss on an unprecedented scale.**

With this loss comes grief. Grief, mostly simply defined, is our emotional response to loss. It is important to note that grief is a normal and natural experience and IS NOT inherently traumatic and that all educators can play a role in supporting grieving students-not just counselors or social workers. Supporting a student through grief does not require a clinical level of intervention or support. Instead, as you'll learn, all educators can play in a role in giving students an opportunity to feel their emotions and process their grief.

The reason that addressing grief appropriately is essential for educators seeking to be trauma informed is because poorly addressed grief, ignored grief, or grief in the context of compounding stress and loss, can become traumatic-impacting our students behavior, regulation, and readiness to learn. When staff members experience loss without adequate support, their pain can not only impact their health and wellbeing, but also their ability to teach and support young people. Having proactive individual and organizational responses in place to support healthy grieving is an essential component of being trauma informed and supporting healing, wellbeing, and resilience.

When considering grief, it's important to understand that grief is not reserved only for the loss of life. Grief is individualized and what a student or educator feels is real about their loss is what is real for them. It is never our job to judge what warrants grief and what does not. As our students learn this year, their losses may be many and can include:

- **The loss of onsite learning and in-person interactions with their teachers and peers**
- **The loss of extra-curricular activities**
- **The loss of athletics**
- **The loss of social interactions with peers**
- **The loss of closure from the 2019-2020 school year**
- **The loss of financial or food security**
- **The loss of milestone acknowledgements**
- **The loss of predictability and routine**
- **The loss of a loved one or community member due to COVID-19 or other causes**

For young people, and depending on their developmental stage, losses that may seem small to adults can feel very big to the child. This can sometimes result from the aggregated toll of compounding losses that continually build in impact. Centering the child's emotional response and perception is key to providing validation and support.

## IN THIS DOCUMENT, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- Ideas and strategies to support students who are grieving
- Ideas and strategies to support staff members who are grieving
- Organizational responses to grief along the continuum of the Missouri Model of Trauma-Informed Care.

# Supporting Students through Grief and Loss

## This guidance is grounded in five core beliefs:

1/ We believe that in order to authentically work with youth through this process, adults must be honest about our own perceptions of grief, healthy grieving, and where our understanding of this process may lack. This includes being honest about our own experiences of grief in the past and the present and how they impact our ability to show up and support students. As adults, we are rarely taught how to grieve in a way that honors what has been lost and propels us towards healing. Without an intentional look within ourselves, we will not be able to support students in this process. Grief work will require radical humility, empathy, and self-reflection.

2/ When working with youth in the grief process, we must become satisfied with not having the perfect answers. Because grief takes on new forms in each student, staff, administrators, teachers, and mentors must actively unpack their discomfort with sitting with students in their pain.

3/ Grief is not a linear process. The expectation of a timeline often undermines the necessity of the processes, causing confusion when grief lingers longer than expected. We must set the understanding that grief can be constant or fleeting. It has the ability to manifest itself in new ways each time we encounter a new loss. Setting the expectation of patience in this process will set our students on a path of understanding their grief and moving forward with it rather than dealing with their grief and moving on from it. Remember: Grief is not something to be solved. It is something to be processed.

4/ The unique grieving rituals across different cultures must be brought to the forefront of the conversation. Without the inclusion of community wisdom on this topic, there is the potential that our students will receive conflicting definitions of the grief process, which could create deep mistrust if their practices are belittled and neglected as valid. The value of individualism in American society has taught some of us that grief is experienced in isolation and should be dealt with alone, but in reality, this approach works for few. Instead, moving toward collective support aligns with the community practices of many of our students.

5/ The voices of students must guide the grief process. As those with power in school buildings, classrooms, and other organizations, it is necessary to create intentional avenues for youth to guide this work. In our commitment to radical humility, we must be willing to hear when our methods are not working and do not serve youth's needs. This also requires us to acknowledge that everyone grieves differently, and the needs may vary between students who experience similar losses.

Supporting our students experiencing grief and loss requires us to recall a fundamental truth: pain demands to be felt. This pain however, does not always look like crying or being sad. Responding to this pain doesn't mean solving it, and often our greatest support role as adults is to sit with our kids in what they are feeling. Educators seeking to better supporting their grieving students must understand:

- How to recognize the signs and symptoms of grief,
- Strategies for creating and offering space to our students to grieve with us, and
- The importance of adult relationships for students experiencing loss.

# Signs and Symptoms of Grief in Young People

When a student experiences loss and shows outward signs of sadness like crying, we are usually able to easily recognize the presence of grief. For many of our students, however, grief takes different forms, including by not limited to:

- Anger
- Lack of motivation
- Isolation
- Somatic symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Anxiety
- Distractedness
- Distrust
- Denial
- Loss of faith
- Forgetfulness
- Apathy
- Feelings of longing and rumination
- Mood swings
- Loss of appetite
- Poor hygiene
- Hopelessness

It's also important to note that some of the grief our students feel may be complicated by feelings of ambivalence. When students lose something that may have caused them pain, stress, or worry, it's normal for their feelings of grief to include relief, calm, and even happiness. For example, a student experiencing the loss of onsite learning may feel sadness over not seeing their teacher, frustration with online learning platforms, and relief that they do not have to wake up early to ride a school bus. All of these feelings, even though they appear conflicting, are real and healthy. Rarely in life do we or our students have only one thought or feeling about something before we lose it, so it is understandable that we may have more than one kind of thought or feeling about something after we lose it.

No matter how grief manifests for our students, it's important to validate it for what it is and help them understand that as long as they are feeling their feelings and reaching out for support when they need it, there's not a right or wrong way to feel about loss.

Obviously, the signs and symptoms of grief frequently mirror the signs and symptoms of stress and trauma and sometimes can even be developmentally typical behaviors. For educators working with younger children in particular, moments of emotional dysregulation, worry, or distrust are expected as they learn to understand themselves and the world. What's important is the motivation behind these signs and symptoms. Keep in mind that in this time when we know our students have lost so much, we should not jump to the conclusion that every behavior is a signifier of grief, but we should take the approach that all of these behaviors COULD signify grief and we should seek to learn more.

# Strategies for Supporting Our Students through Grief

Brene Brown, social worker, author, and speaker once said "My mom taught us to never look away from people's pain. Don't look away. Don't look down. Don't pretend to not see hurt. Look people in the eye, even when their pain is overwhelming. Then, when you're in pain, find the people who can look you in the eye."

This quote embodies the value of creating space for our students to grieve with us. When we look our student's pain in the eye, we know that our job is not to have the perfect thing to say or the perfect thing to do to end the pain. It is our job to sit in it with our students. The gift of accompanying our students in their pain can have tremendous impacts on their ability to cope with and integrate their loss.

There's not a single script or activity that will fit the personality, skills, and strengths of every educator. Instead, consider the following ideas for what aligns with you and identify ways to proactively and responsively make space for our students' grief.

- Normalize conversations about grief. Whenever loss is encountered in books your students may read or historical events they may learn about, or when you talk about the loss created by COVID-19, help your students understand that it's normal and healthy for people to have emotional responses to loss. If and when your school has to announce the cancellation of events because of COVID-19 or make difficult decisions about the necessity of virtual learning, be proactive in offering space to students to acknowledge their emotional response to these losses.

Provide artistic opportunities for students to reflect on their feelings generally, or their feelings on loss more specifically, without having to necessarily speak them out loud.

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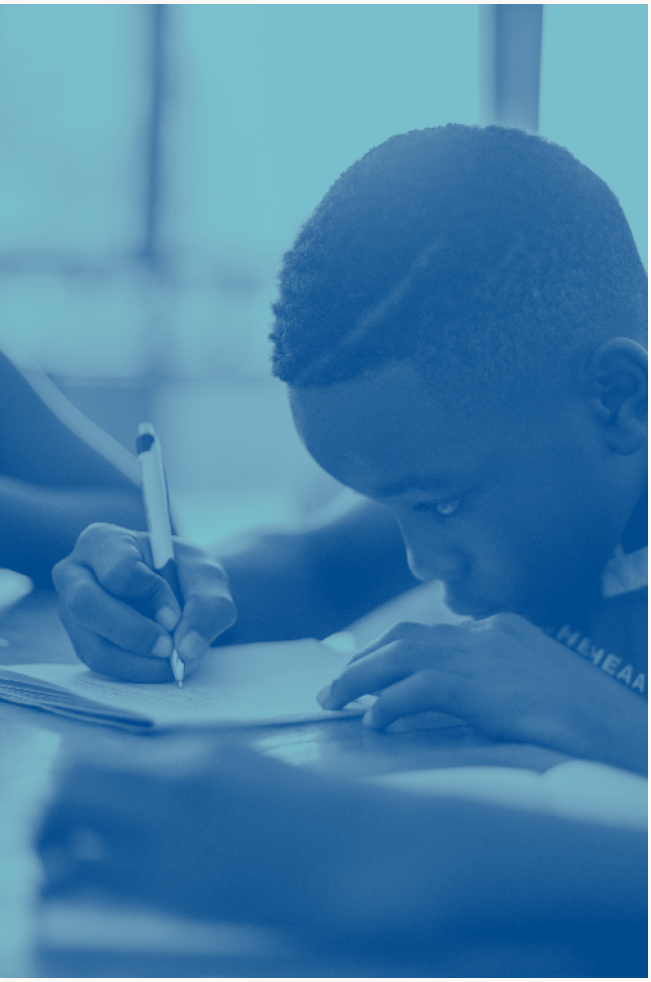
- Utilize acronym reflections in which a student identifies a word to represent a loss they have experienced and then identifies a word that corresponds with each letter in that word reflecting what they miss. See below for an example.
  - Grandparents cheering
  - Recognizing my accomplishment
  - Accepting validation
  - Dancing with excitement
  - Understanding my family's pride
  - Accompanying my classmates
  - Taking it all in
  - Inviting loved ones to my party
  - Owning my success
  - Name being called
- Give verbal permission for students to feel their feelings. Say "you're allowed to feel anything you need to with me" or "I know these feelings are really big, but I'm here with you."
- Help students understand and prepare for their "first clear day" or what it will be like when they no longer think about this loss as often. Let them know it's a sign of healing and progress, and that processing their feelings does not mean they will forget about the importance of their loss.



# The Power of Adult Relationships

One of the hardest truths to accept is that we cannot protect young people from the pain and reality of loss and grief. Instead, we have to view ourselves as having the honor to teach, learn from, and walk alongside them as we confront the heartbreaking aspects of life.

Remember-it's not the job of every educator to become a therapist for their students, but it is the job of every educator to see their students for who they are and what they are feeling. Making space for their pain is an important part of doing so.

There are also times in which our students who experience loss will benefit from the help of a professional therapist or counselor. When you find that your students' signs and symptoms of grief are not improving over time, or when their needs exceed what you can provide as an educator, referring them to qualified community based professionals can be an important part of helping them recover and return to being ready to learn.

# Supporting Educators through Grief and Loss

**It is not just our students who entered school this year navigating loss. Educators are dealing with grief of their own, and this grief may impact their health, well-being, ability to teach, and capacity to support grieving students.**

Offering peer support to grieving educators is an essential component of a trauma-informed school's response to loss. Supporting educators appropriately requires us to understand all the following:

- Signs and symptoms of traumatic grief in adults
- Strategies for supporting adults through grief and loss
- A trauma-informed organizational response to grief and loss

## Signs and Symptoms of Grief in Adults

**Just as with our students, the signs and symptoms of healthy grief can range from sadness to anger, tiredness to restlessness, and despair to joy and just as with students, the full variety of emotional responses that adults may feel to grief can be normal and healthy.**

It is important, however, to be attuned to the signs of traumatic grief in adults, which can have clinically significant symptoms and be linked to things like Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Understanding some of the signs and symptoms of traumatic grief in adults is not about becoming responsible for their diagnosis or treatment, but rather is a way for us to be better attuned to when our colleagues may need more support or may benefit from the help

of a mental health professional. Signs and symptoms that might signify the need for more intensive support for educators experiencing loss include, but are not limited to:

- Persistent focus on the loss including intense, daily longing
- Feeling that life is meaningless
- Significant change in diet
- Intense attachment or rejection of reminders
- Intense flashbacks
- Recurring nightmares
- Loss of interest in activities that previously brought joy
- Paranoia or extreme fear

# Supporting Educators through Grief and Loss

Experiencing loss as adults is a nearly universal experience and at various points in most educator's careers, there will be a time where they are teaching amidst loss. When we recognize the symptoms of grief in our colleagues, it is often a signal that they may need more people willing to sit with them in the reality of their loss and pain, and as members of a supportive school community, we all must seek to find the ways in which we can create this with each other. Often, in an effort avoid upsetting others, we may avoid bringing up loss with a colleague, when in fact-most people experiencing grief would welcome the opportunity to share with and be supported by those in their lives. If you're seeking to better support a colleague experiencing grief, remember:

- Do not look away or move too quickly to change the subject when someone brings up or references their loss.
- Proactively invite them to share about their feelings with you. Don't stop at, "I'm here if you need me." Instead, consider scheduling a lunch or after school phone call with the invitation that you'd just like to hear from them how they are doing.
- If they start to share about their loss with you, ask them open-ended questions. If they lost a loved one or community member, be curious about what they loved or valued in that person. If they are grieving the loss of something else, ask them to tell you about how and why it meant so much to them.
- Check judgments and assumptions about what or how they should be feeling. Remind yourself frequently that your imagined response to their loss should not dictate what they should feel and that we all deal with loss differently.
- Provide them referrals and connections to supports available to help them. Be specific and proactive by providing them with information on exactly how they could utilize behavioral health services through your insurance plan or Employee Assistance Program. You can even offer to sit with them for that first call to a professional asking for help. Sometimes, our best support comes from getting people connected with the professionals who can help.

# Organizational Responses to Grief and Loss

**The journey a school takes to become trauma informed recognizes that in order to truly create a culture of healing and well-being, it must become the organizational norm-not simply the will of a few passionate individuals. Within the Missouri Model for Trauma-Informed Schools, there are four distinct stages of the trauma-informed journey. Within each stage, there are practices, policies, and approaches we can take to better support grief.**

**STAGE 1/**

**TRAUMA AWARE RESPONSES TO GRIEF AND LOSS**

At this stage, school leaders and educators understand the prevalence and signs/symptoms of trauma for employees, the organization, and those it serves.

- School leaders and educators seek to understand which types of losses and to what extent employees, clients, and those in the broader community are affected by life disruptions and losses related to the current crisis
- Leaders and educators seek to reconcile current losses with existing accumulations of stress and deprivation which may compound social, emotional, physical, psychological, and work-related challenges.

**STAGE 2/**

**TRAUMA SENSITIVE RESPONSES TO GRIEF AND LOSS**

At this stage, school leaders and educators actively seek to understand the nuanced ways trauma affects educators, the school, and the students they educate. Decision makers adjust policies and practices after applying nuanced knowledge of its resources and information about the crisis- and trauma-related needs of its stakeholders

- Leaders and educators seek to understand which needs of its circle of concern have been affected in general, and specifically as it relates to the school's work and priorities.
- Leaders regularly connect with internal stakeholders and those it serves to act on its values around care and concern. Educators develop a routine approach to regularly contacting and assessing the needs, resource gaps, and impact of the current crisis on those they serve.
- Leaders create intentional space and time for staff and stakeholder connections. They work collaboratively to establish rituals for mourning and healing, including for themselves.

**STAGE 3/**

**TRAUMA RESPONSIVE RESPONSES TO GRIEF AND LOSS**

At this stage, school leaders and educators identify efficient and powerful levers to support grief processing and healing. Decision makers initiate policy and practice change after evaluation of current processes, reconciling stakeholder needs, and planning targeted actions.

- School leaders and educators maintain high standards while providing targeted supports that help students and staff manage their unique grief process and meet trauma-sensitive performance expectations.
- Leaders and educators evaluate performance management and human resource processes through the lens of trauma to determine which policies support processing through the grief or penalize potential stress responses associated with being overwhelmed (e.g. acting out, freezing, and/or shutting down).
- Leaders adjust leave policies, bereavement policies, virtual office arrangements, thresholds for what qualifies as a "significant life event," and the employee assistance program to ensure needed resources and services are provided at low to no cost for employees and in a timely manner.
- Leaders and staff establish referral relationships and service agreements with providers of individual, family, in-person, and virtual grief counseling for those they serve.

**STAGE 4/**

**TRAUMA INFORMED RESPONSES TO GRIEF AND LOSS**

At this stage, school leaders and educators continually adapt policies and practices to support grief processing and healing from trauma.

- School leaders and educators continuously monitor historical and current circumstances that contribute to collective and/or community grief and trauma.
- Decision makers update policies, practices, and procedures in a timely fashion to reflect current circumstances and needs. Leaders ensure flexibility in various organizational programs to meet the diverse grief- and healing-related needs of current employees.
- Leaders and affected stakeholders regularly collaborate to refine healing-centered metrics and co-construct actions that support grief processing, healing, and restoration.

**As you seek this school year and beyond to best support your students and educators through loss, remember that the gift of our time, presence, and unwavering support is our best tool in supporting healthy grief.**

**If you have questions about anything in this document, please email info@awcommunities.org. To learn more about this topic, check out Grief Guidance for Educators and Youth Workers and Trauma-Responsive Organizational Approaches to Grief Processing Healing: COVID-19 and Beyond.**

Missouri DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION™

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