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Grief counseling after tragedies is important



**Answers
from
Janie**

*by Janie
Simpson,
L.C.S.W.*

Tragedies occur every day that affect an entire school community – tragedies involving significant loss of people and/or property. A child dies suddenly and all classmates and teachers are affected. If a parent or sibling of a classmate dies suddenly, the other children will feel the impact.

Another kind of tragedy is the sudden loss of property due to a natural disaster such as a hurricane or a fire. These incidents, sudden, traumatic and sometimes violent, impact a whole school.

Often the media will report that grief counselors will be available at the school. What is the role of grief counselors in schools, what kind of training should they have, and what do they do in the short period of time they are deployed at a school?

When a grief counselor is called into a school after a

traumatic event, his/her main job is to do crisis management with all involved. There are immediate problems to deal with, such as to:

- verify what happened;
- protect the family's right to privacy but also consider the needs of students and staff;
- meet with school staff and provide accurate information and implement the school's crisis management plan;
- designate a person to serve as a case manager who can make referrals and follow up;
- set up a "care center" for students and faculty to come to for help.

After the immediate issues are dealt with, the counselors begin to meet with students and faculty in small groups where they can have a chance to talk about what they are experiencing. Counselors also identify people who need ongoing treatment and make sure they have a referral and that there is a follow-up plan.

Grief counselors help students realize that symptoms such as startle reactions, restlessness, agitation, sleeplessness, depression and anxiety are typical intense

reactions to a traumatic experience. They also help them come to terms with anger at the person who died, at themselves, or at others. Guilt is also a common grief reaction; there is that false belief that one should have prevented the death.

There is specialized training in grief and mourning and trauma reactions as well as complicated grief. Counselors need to equip the faculty to watch for grieving students who are disoriented, confused, impatient, sad, inattentive and disruptive.

Often grief counselors do not stay in schools for extended periods of time. Their job is to intervene in the immediate shock period of a tragedy, to give students and faculty the opportunity to process the tragedy with others experiencing the same thing, to educate everyone about grief and trauma reactions, and set up ongoing referral systems for children and faculty having the most difficulty. Grief counselors want school and the community to know grief is exhausting work that does not go away quickly.

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