

Applying a Grief Response Framework to Death/Loss in Schools

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Abstract

School counselors play a crucial role when schools face any type of tragedy or loss, many times learning from experience because response plans are not in place. School counselors are called upon to help shape and provide the response to students, staff, and parents. The demands of managing all of the aspects of school tragedy, in addition to the tragedy itself, can be overwhelming. This article provides a framework that will guide school counselors in providing a comprehensive response to death or loss in schools.

Keywords: grief, school counseling, response, school tragedies

Background

When responding to a school tragedy, a response plan is needed ahead of time (Haviland, 2007; McGlaufflin, Massatt, Moses, & Ornstein, 2007) to guide the school community in dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic event. Hart and Garza (2013) support the need to be proactive, noting that many times crisis plans are not developed until after a crisis has occurred, which may create distrust; yet, a crisis plan helps build competency and may reduce

anxiety. A structured plan or guidebook is needed to help deal with grief. Training is needed for teachers because they may feel inadequate in responding appropriately to overwhelming grief.

There are published response plan formats available, such as from Kerr's (2009) comprehensive text on crisis intervention. Most school districts have some type of crisis plan in place. Yet, many of these plans deal with a whole range of issues involving administrative duties such as calling emergency personnel and arranging for physical safety. Since school counselors are charged with providing personal and social support to students and the school family, there is a need for school counselors to have a plan specifically to guide them through handling the emotional aftermath of a tragedy, whether it be a disaster that affects an entire school, such as the recent Sandy Hook tragedy, or a student or teacher death that affects one classroom or a grade level.

Grief Response Framework

Provided here is a framework (Appendix A), congruent with recommendations from the literature regarding handling school crises.

The framework guides school counselors through responding to a traumatic event. The framework is divided into three main components: Administrative Support, Grief Support, and Evaluation. How school counselors can respond in each of these key areas is addressed.

Administrative Support

The first area of the response framework is Administrative Support. One of the first administrative tasks is to make sure that areas are set up for students needing counseling support. Counselors may identify suitable areas such as the media center, an empty classroom, or whatever spaces the school has available to accommodate numbers of students. Set-up includes having basics such as bottled water for drinking and tissues available for students. Attending to the basic needs of students and providing physical supports help students cope with their emotions (Kerr, 2009).

Another essential task is to identify students most at risk. This may include students who suffered a loss, or who were close to the situation or victim. This may also include students who have experienced multiple losses or losses for which they are still grieving, or students who already have mental health issues. (Kerr, 2009; Lenhardt, 2000; O'Brien, Mills, Fraser, & Andersson, 2011; Shaughnessy, 2011). Students may also have secondary losses after tragedies, such as financial issues or a parent being less available (Shaughnessy, 2011). Counselors, who are in regular contact with students through various school activities and individual and group counseling, possess valuable information regarding students' histories; thus, counselors will help identify at-risk students and staff. School counselors also

have the role of activating the emotional response team- those professionals in the school and community who have proactively been solicited to assist with overwhelming grief issues.

School counselors will also assist with the administrative task of sending home a letter to parents/guardians, if warranted by the scope of the tragedy. Schools may decide if the letter actually comes from the principal or the counselor, yet either way, the counselor's knowledge, sensitivity, and experience dealing with emotional issues will be invaluable in the crafting of the letter (Kerr, 2009).

Grief Support

The second area of the framework, Grief Support, involves the critical role of school counselors in responding to a tragic event. Counselors provide support to school personnel, their primary target population- students, and to families. The goal is to create a school climate which is sensitive to the numbers of children experiencing loss(es) and to the magnitude of the loss(es) and to bring awareness to the students' need to grieve (McGlaufflin, 1998). Counselors can help provide a safe environment for discussion, conduct support groups, assist with transitions, and work with teachers to minimize grief triggers. Schools are the ideal location to provide support for grieving students because of their relationships with teachers and staff and because teachers understand child development issues (Shaughnessy, 2011). Teachers and other school staff such as coaches and secretaries, touch students on a personal level, see them day to day, and students trust them (Hart & Garza, 2013; Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). In fact, students are reluctant to share feelings with strangers such as professionals outside the school

coming in to assist (Haviland, 2007).

School counselors can assist teachers in dealing with grief issues in several ways. One way is to assist teachers in informing students of the tragedy as sometimes teachers feel inadequately prepared to deal with such issues. Some teachers may even be silent, not wanting to speak of the loss in the classroom (Hart & Garza, 2013). In the recent Sandy Hook tragedy, teachers were concerned about how to answer students' questions (District Administration, 2013). School counselors may go into classrooms and be the ones to deliver the sad news, or school counselors may help prepare a reference sheet of talking points which teachers can follow in providing accurate and sensitive information.

Another way counselors may assist teachers and other staff is by educating them regarding grief discussions with students and how students grieve. Teachers and staff may not know how to support a student who has experienced a loss (Haggard, 2005), or may not understand how students view death differently at different age levels. For example, younger elementary students may believe death is avoidable or reversible, feel abandoned, and have difficulty expressing their feelings, not having the vocabulary to adequately describe their feelings. Adolescents understand the concept of death better and will have more philosophical type questions about the meaning of life. Some teens will engage in high-risk behaviors believing death will not happen to them (Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). Teachers need to be aware that grieving students may exhibit such behaviors as lack of concentration, not completing assignments, fatigue, withdrawal or excessive emotional reactions, and aggressiveness (McGlaufflin, 1998). In

addition to reduced social and emotional functioning, academics and attendance may also suffer (Raider, Steele, & Kuban, 2012). There is a substantial body of literature available regarding children's and adolescents' grieving processes, yet delving into that discussion is beyond the scope of the focus of this article, which is to provide a framework for dealing with grief issues in schools.

School counselors may also assist teachers in learning to have a genuine dialogue about loss issues including the need to discuss that death is part of life; the loss experience can be used as a learning experience (Bennett & Dyehouse, 2005). Students and adults should become knowledgeable about the grieving process. Most students appreciate the opportunity to talk about their grief experiences. Teachers can allow opportunities for students to express their grief (McGlaufflin, 1998).

School counselors also need to remember that teachers may be experiencing their own grief (Black, 2005; Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). School personnel need time to grieve and cope and time for rest and renewal (Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). Sharing vital information with faculty promotes a sense of unity and provides opportunities for faculty and staff to check on each other. They want to be informed about what is going on; they want to be kept up to date from school officials, not learning information as students walk in the door (Haviland, 2007).

In addition to providing grief support and education to faculty and staff, school counselors must focus on the emotional needs of all students affected by a tragedy. After affected students have been identified, counselors can provide individual and small

group counseling so that students may express their feelings. Recovery or counseling rooms can be set up so that traumatized students may receive additional support; some students may seek this support on their own while others may need to be encouraged by counselors or staff to participate. Counselors may also provide classroom guidance sessions, as appropriate, to deliver information about the tragedy to help monitor the grieving process, and to allow discussion to help students process the event(s). Students need the opportunity to share their feelings and to be comforted (O'Brien, Mills, Fraser, & Andersson, 2011). As mentioned for teachers, counselors also need to consider the manner in which children grieve. Counselors should acknowledge how severe and overwhelming a loss can be, and be prepared for resistance, especially from adolescents. Counselors may use such interventions as bibliotherapy, journaling, memory books, relaxation techniques (Lenhardt, 2000), role-playing, listening to music (O'Brien, Mills, Fraser, & Anderson, 2011), art, puppets, and games (Andrews & Marotta, 2005) in providing support to grieving students. Other guidelines are to provide honest information, speak from compassion, not pity, and to show appropriate emotion (McGlaufflin, 1998). Counselors also need to recognize that students may express their grief by creating impromptu memorials of items such as cards, flowers, and stuffed animals around desks, lockers, or vehicles (Fast, 2003; Richard, 2001). Additionally, counselors in realizing that mourning takes place over time (Fast, 2003), and that grief does not end with funerals (Massat, Moses, & Ornstein), need to be prepared to provide ongoing support and even to recognize tragedies on important dates, including anniversary dates of the tragic events (Bennett & Dyehouse, 2005; McGlaufflin, 1998).

Another school counselor role is to provide support for victims' families. Health of family systems in dealing with tragedies may affect students' ability to deal with grief. Lack of coping can lead to parents' being less involved in schoolwork or school activities (Andrews & Marotta, 2005). Another aspect of reaching out to families is to involve them in decisions about what should be told to students and in planning for memorials. Families may not want certain details shared (Bennett & Dyehouse, 2005; Massat, Moses, and Ornstein, 2008). Opportunities should be given for families to give input regarding what type of memorial, if any, should be constructed at the school. Memorials can help students, staff, and the victim's family gain closure and move on (Bennett & Dyehouse, 2005). Schools do need to have policies in place regarding memorials so that they are appropriate and because they establish a precedent for memorials for future losses (Kerr, 2009). Some examples of appropriate memorials are planting a tree, constructing a memory book, writing letters, having an online blog, and releasing balloons (Hart & Garza, 2013).

Evaluation

The third major area of the framework is Evaluation. It is essential to meet with faculty and staff just after responding to a tragedy to obtain feedback on how all affected are doing and to determine the effectiveness of the response effort. This allows for tweaking of continued response and possible revisions to the response plan. Debriefing allows for continued support to responders. In addition to obtaining verbal feedback, surveys can be distributed shortly after the tragedy to gain further input from responders (Kerr, 2009). In fact the need for teacher training regarding response to loss and the need for structured

plans have been learned from follow-up surveys (Hart & Garza, 2013).

Another aspect of the Evaluation phase is to use feedback information in determining which students and staff need follow-up services outside the school system. Appropriate referrals may be made to community resources for physical and emotional needs (Lenhardt, 2000). After experiencing a tragedy, a school may see the need in retrospect to follow the recommendation of some professionals to incorporate death and change education in the school curriculum; training and educational materials may also be provided to teachers and school staff. Students and adults can be taught that grief is natural and healthy, results in unique responses in individuals, is a life-long process, and that everyone is capable of healing in a safe, supportive environment. Children's losses, regardless of severity, can be grieved so that they learn that grief is a normal reaction (McGlaufflin, 1998).

Reflection

When tragedies occur in schools, school counselors are at the forefront in providing an effective response. Because there are so many elements to address in responding to grief in schools, a comprehensive plan is needed to guide the response. School counselors can help ensure that all necessary steps in a response effort are carried out- from managing the grief reactions of students, families, and staff, to assisting in informing and supporting families, to helping plan memorials. The framework provided here for responding to grief could be particularly helpful to guide those new to the profession, or those who have not yet experienced a school tragedy. The framework is also useful, not only in guiding all school counselors in making

sure all essential areas are covered, but also in building confidence and lessening anxieties.

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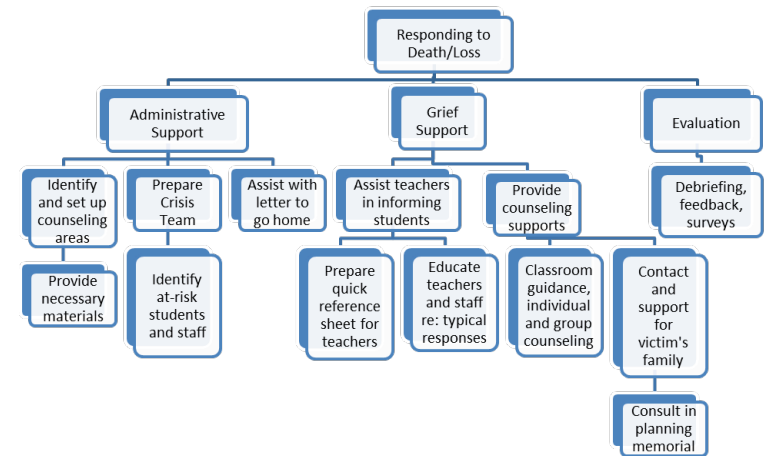
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Appendix A



Framework developed with assistance from Fort Valley State University School Counselor Education students Jennifer Mathis and Dary Myrick, 2011.