



Bereavement Guidelines

Date Published: May 2011

Due for Review:

Responsible: **CMR**

Overview

These guidelines are intended to facilitate action when there is a death in our school community. This may be in the case of a student, a staff member or anyone related such as a parent, sibling or, for example, a spouse. They aim to provide a framework and resources so that those involved in and possibly responsible for taking action in response to the bereavement can more confidently proceed in what may be an emotional situation. Decisions may need to be swiftly taken and communication sensitive.

Values and Belief Statement

In accordance with our school Mission Statement, Values and Aims, the Bereavement Guidelines reflect the importance we place on understanding, respecting and offering the optimum support available to anyone in our school community suffering the impact of grief.

What do we know and how do we act

Bereavement means losing someone loved through death. This may be traumatic for those involved, especially initially and in the early stages. The impact is largely unpredictable; however, may manifest in emotional, physical, spiritual and social ways. Commonly people experience pain, or grief. Every individual is unique in terms of their response to bereavement, so it is important to proceed with sensitivity, to avoid making assumptions and to be mindful of language used with people who have been shocked by a recent death. The loss of someone in their lives could mean a considerable adjustment is required.

What to do in school:

When a death occurs, those affected may not respond predictably. At the school level, information may be gleaned in various ways and it may be disseminated such that it needs to be verified in the first instance. It may appear that news of the death appears simultaneously in numerous places around the school. Oftentimes people are unaware about what to do with the information. They feel a sense of urgency and the gravity of the situation; however, don't know how to proceed.

If possible, a coordinated response which is controlled and calm can be the most reassuring for an individual or family perplexed and unable to act due to shock. Convene a small team of the most relevant people immediately. This may include the Principal, the counsellor, the social worker, the VP responsible for Guidance and Achievement and the Tutor. Consider who needs to be informed about the death and how this should happen. Allocate roles to the team members. Their primary focus is the welfare of the grieving individual/family, in the short term, but they may need to remain in close touch for approximately one month.

Decide who should directly express condolences to the grieving individual. If this is not feasible face to face, a telephone call or another type of immediate message should be sent, preferably by the Principal or someone at the school who knows the student/family. The counsellor, social worker or member of the Guidance and Achievement team could be alerted and ready to offer support. These people can also arrange to meet with additional members of the family, such as siblings and parents, if this is deemed helpful. Being guided by what the grieving individual wants is critical.

Decide when and how to convey information. Be expedient about communicating with whomever it is decided must be told; the more time passes, the more likelihood rumours and gossip will exacerbate grief and anxiety. The Tutor, subject teachers and the Head of Year are examples of the most significant individuals who should receive information immediately, if a student has died, unless there is a specific reason for delay. Don't embellish or

sensationalise in communications but keep these messages factual and respectful. Be judicious in the use of email and refer questions/inquiries to the team handling the death or the counsellors. The grieving individual/family should not have to field these at the school level, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the announcement.

Given our Chinese context, it can be illuminating to consult with the social worker or a member of the support staff who is acquainted with cultural traditions and sensitivities, if these are applicable. These colleagues may also assist with translating more subtle understandings of grief and mourning in dealings with the family.

Consideration can be given to sending flowers on behalf of the school, both to the family home and to the funeral. Flowers are not restricted to females, either, and can be symbolically significant. Additionally, cards sent by fellow students under the auspices of a Tutor, officially by the leadership team, by a Faculty or by any other group can also have a meaningful impact.

If the individual who dies is a student of the school more multifaceted arrangements will be most certainly need to be made. For example, establish a reflection room for people to visit and contemplate, in peace, the life of the deceased. Visitors should have the opportunity to write comments in a book of memories dedicated to the lost student, which included photographs. There may be a memorial and closure arrangements as a sign of esteem. Fellow students could be provided chances to talk and grieve openly to prevent any suffering intensifying. Teachers might talk to their classes, giving students openings to ask questions and discuss ways to help their bereaved classmates.

It is advisable that the Tutor, or a member of the aforementioned team, contact the family before a grieving student returns to school. All subject teachers should then be informed that this is imminent and updated on how the student is faring; advice to teachers will be welcomed. During the readjustment period the sanctuary and routines of school can be comforting for those who are mourning. When the grieving child returns to school, even close friends may need encouragement to voice difficult feelings so loss is acknowledged. The immediate friendship group of a student who is bereaved may benefit from direction and guidance about what they can say and do.

At the ESF Centre level, provision is made for school fee relief if a parent/spouse dies. This is not means tested, but to support families in such circumstances and for three months duration. Families must contact Ms Doris Kwok, in the School Fees Section.

Suggested strategies for teachers dealing with grieving students:

- Allow students the opportunity to talk about what has occurred. Don't interrupt them and try not to show embarrassment or 'shut down' their powerful emotions or crying. The student may be relieved to talk about what has happened. Don't feel remiss that you can't remedy the situation or make the student feel happy again.
- Use language with students that will help them articulate their emotions. Don't use euphemisms like 'Gone to Heaven' or 'Passed away' because this will only confuse them.
- Even if you think it will be helpful and you have been in a similar situation, **don't say** '*I know how you feel*'. No-one can really know this.
- Send cards and letters/emails of condolence (and you can organize/ encourage students in your care to do this, too), but don't anticipate any response.
- Behave normally with the grieving student. They will provide you will indicators of what to do and responses to make.
- Some students benefit from knowing they are permitted to leave the classroom for a short while if they are pre-occupied by grief. You can discuss with the student a suitable place for them go on these occasions.
- It may help the student to write, draw or paint about what had happened. Some students make small their own memory books and other memorials to lost loved ones
- Watch carefully and discreetly to ensure that the student does not show signs of prolonged guilt, anger, severe depression, suicidal tendencies or no grief at all. If you notice any of these signs, report them to the

Head of Year, counsellor and VP for Guidance and Achievement. Signs of grief may manifest despite them *appearing* to be over and may be an issue much later when perhaps the Tutor, Head of Year and other key personnel may have changed.

Resources:

- <http://www.griefworksbc.com/AdolescentGrief.asp>
- www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/
- [Teen bereavement www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)
- www.childbereavement.org.uk
- Jan Beasley at Phoenix Counselling
- Childhood Bereavement: Developing the Curriculum and Pastoral Support (National Children's Bureau UK)