



## Secondary and Cumulative Losses

### Take-Home Message

**Primary loss:** the death of an immediate family member, close friend or loved one.

**Secondary loss:** Children experience secondary losses as the result of a primary loss such as the death of a loved one—such things as changes in relationships, schools, family finances, and lifestyle. Grieving children mourn not only the loss of the person who died, but these associated losses.

**Cumulative loss:** In communities with high rates of violence, students may have experienced the death of multiple peers and family members. They do not become accustomed to such losses. Rather, they become more sensitized to loss and death.

When school personnel are aware of these types of loss, they are better able to provide helpful support to students.

### Secondary Loss

The death of a family member or friend is considered a primary loss. When a close family member dies, children may also experience a range of secondary losses that are the result of a primary loss and contribute to the difficulty of adjusting to the death.

Common secondary losses include:

- **Changed relationships.** Friends and associates of the deceased may no longer be a regular part of children's lives. For example, after the death of an older sister, a student might no longer see the sister's boyfriend, who may have served as an important role model, confidant, or source of support. Relationships that seem incidental to adults, or even to the children themselves, may be quite significant. This is especially true for children who have limited support or are experiencing family or personal challenges.



- **Changes in school.** Sometimes a family must move after a death. Moving to a new school disrupts friendship networks and reduces the support students may have been receiving at their old school.
- **Financial challenges.** When a family provider dies, there may be new and sudden financial difficulties.
- **Changes in lifestyle.** If there are financial challenges, the family may have to move to a smaller apartment, a less expensive neighborhood, or the home of extended family members. There may be less privacy and comfort. The child may not be able to participate in extracurricular or after-school programs that cost money.
- **Changes in peer group or status.** Moving, a new school, or diminished resources can change children's friendship networks or their status among their peers.
- **A parent who is less available.** A surviving parent may have to work more and have less time to spend with children. A parent who is struggling with depression or complicated grief may not be emotionally available.
- **Loss of shared memories.** Children feel connected to family and loved ones through shared memories about their times together. This might include private jokes, stories about the child's early years, or shared experiences. No one else knows them in quite this way, and no one else will ever know them in this way again. Children may also lose the opportunity to learn more about their own and their family's history.
- **Change in future plans.** After the death of a parent or provider, teens may not be able to follow through on plans for college or developing a career. They may not be able to afford the college or trade school they had chosen. They may not have the help they had expected with the application process or choosing a school. They may not want to go to a school that reminds them of their loved one (e.g., their father's alma mater), or they may feel obligated to go to that school. They may feel a need to get into the job market immediately to help the family financially and give up other plans.
- **Loss of special recognition and support.** Children look to loved ones for support at challenging times and recognition at times of success and achievement. Without the support of the deceased, they may find achievements less rewarding and feel less motivated to pursue their interests and goals.
- **Decreased sense of security and safety.** After the death of a loved one, children lose the ability to count on their worlds being safe in the same way. If this person could die, others they love could also die.

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# Secondary and Cumulative Losses

## Secondary Loss: What School Personnel Can Do

Each student's experience of secondary loss will be different, depending on the situation. School personnel can help greatly by appreciating and recognizing the range of possible losses. They can ask specifically about these issues, or use their knowledge about a student to offer support.

For example, if a teacher realizes that a student looked forward to the school science fair because of the pride he received from his mother coming to the event, the teacher could offer assistance and encouragement for the project. The teacher could speak to the surviving parent to see if another family member could attend. The teacher could also stop by the science fair and offer attention and praise to the student.

## Cumulative Loss

Communities that face high rates of violence may have many students who have experienced the death of multiple peers and family members. Adults too often assume these children have somehow become accustomed to these losses. They fail to recognize students' many acute expressions of grief.

In communities without this background of violence, children who experience a death and have both personal resiliency and external support from caring adults are likely to cope well with the loss. They will eventually establish a renewed sense of personal safety and security. They may emerge with new coping skills that prepare them for future adversity.

In neighborhoods characterized by community violence, poverty and neighborhood disorganization may complicate the setting further. Children here may have personal resiliency, but often lack sufficient external support to cope effectively with death. With each subsequent death, they emerge more vulnerable to the impact of future loss.

Traumatic experiences accentuate the feelings of sadness, anxiety, and stress that they naturally feel.

These cumulative losses are neither protective nor desensitizing. Children do not get used to the death of their peers or family members.

Students in these communities may come to believe that adults are unable to provide support after a death has occurred. They may view adults in their lives as also unable to establish a safe environment. They may appear to dismiss concerns after a death or show no reaction. Their failure to ask for support is often not because they don't need it, but because they believe it is futile to ask.

Children may turn to peers for support. They might engage in a range of risky behaviors to challenge their fears about their own mortality. Children afraid of dying from community violence may join gangs if they believe that is their sole option for finding protection.

## Cumulative Loss: What School Personnel Can Do

Children generally want and need to talk about important and meaningful experiences in their lives. It's hard to imagine anything that fits this description more than the frequent violent deaths of family members, friends, and peers. Children will benefit from adult guidance about how to express their thoughts and feelings, and how to cope best under these frightening circumstances. They will also benefit from being reminded of their personal resiliency and the support system they still have.

School personnel can achieve a great deal by providing opportunities for grieving students to express themselves and be heard by concerned, caring, and competent adults. While this is true in all settings, it is perhaps even more critical in the setting of cumulative loss.

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For more information  
on supporting grieving  
students, refer to  
*The Grieving Student:  
A Guide for Schools*  
by David Schonfeld and  
Marcia Quackenbush.

