

# Professional Self-Care

## Take-Home Message

Most school professionals choose their profession because they want to help children learn and develop. Precisely because they care so deeply about students, offering support to grieving children can be both deeply gratifying and demanding. Providing support means bearing witness to students' pain. It is critical that school professionals take care of themselves and their colleagues in ways that recognize the challenges of this work.

## Lasting Impact

There are few ways to have a more meaningful and lasting impact on children than providing support as they cope with one of life's most difficult challenges. In supporting grieving children, teachers connect with students in a powerful and qualitatively different way. It can be gratifying to see that relatively modest efforts to offer compassion and support have a dramatic effect on children. This support can help reduce the amount of time grieving children feel isolated, confused, or distressed.

## Grief Is Difficult to Witness

Being with children who are in distress can be unsettling for adults. We sense a vulnerability in children and naturally want to shield them from painful experiences. Children's questions as they try to make sense of a death can be poignant and moving. It can be difficult to bear witness as children struggle to cope with a death, and in so doing, lose some of their innocence about the world.

Sometimes it is difficult to recognize that the assistance we provide is important. We reach out to help others in the hopes they will feel "better." But students who are actively grieving can be very upset. We may question how helpful we're being if the person we're helping is sobbing in despair.



When school personnel talk with grieving students only in the immediate aftermath of a death, they see children when they are feeling most overwhelmed. It may be difficult to remember that students cope differently with these feelings over time, and they do not always feel their despair so deeply. Checking in with students at a later point—even a year or two later—will reveal the growth and acceptance that typically come as time passes. This can help affirm that the assistance provided was meaningful. Students generally appreciate these expressions of concern.

If you have questions about how best to support grieving students, don't hesitate to seek consultation. Look to the school counselor, school nurse, school psychologist, school social worker, or other members of the school staff who have skills or experience in this area. Reassurance that you are doing what is needed can be very helpful.

## Triggers for Adults

Supporting grieving children can trigger a range of reactions in adults. This is especially true if a child's loss is somehow similar to an adult's personal experience. But even when the circumstances are quite different, the simple, powerful reality of a grieving child can raise thoughts, feelings, and memories concerning the adult's own family and friends.

Examples of situations where adults may experience triggers include:

- A past personal experience with grief. School professionals who experienced the death of a parent during childhood may bring greater empathy and insight to their interactions with grieving students. They will also be more likely to experience a rekindling of their own memories.
- Coping with serious illness. An adult facing a life-changing or life-threatening illness may become more anxious about personal health and outcomes while comforting a student whose parent or sibling died of a serious illness such as cancer.
- Having a friend or family member who is ill. When someone close to a school professional is facing possible disability or death, a student's grief may heighten worries or anticipatory grief reactions.
- New concerns about loved ones. Even when adults are not dealing with past deaths or current illnesses in their lives, the process of watching a child struggle to cope may heighten their own concerns about family and loved ones. A child's grief can be a stark reminder that all life is fragile and uncertain.

**(Continued)**

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## Discomfort With the Role

School professionals may feel uncomfortable with the role of providing support for grieving children. It may feel like an additional expectation that is outside the realm of teaching academic subjects. They may feel untrained and unprepared to offer such support.

Sometimes teachers who feel resentful or unprepared in this way also feel guilty. They realize how important support can be to grieving students. They may feel that they aren't putting in the appropriate amount of effort or that they are lacking some essential skill for effective teaching.

These are fairly common feelings. It is important for all school professionals to assess honestly and fairly what they feel able to do. Each individual is a member of a broader team that is available to support grieving students. While it is important that critical services be provided to students in need, it isn't necessary for the bulk of those services to be provided by any one member of the team.

Teachers and other staff should monitor their personal reactions and offer what they are able to at a given point in time. It is acceptable and appropriate to seek assistance from others to ensure that necessary support is provided to grieving students. There will be times when it may be best to call on a colleague to take the lead in supporting a student.

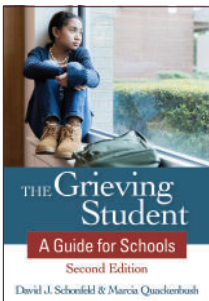
There will be opportunities to pay back such favors, either by taking the lead in supporting a student at another time or by assisting a colleague in some other way.

Keep in mind that allowing others to assist you when a student needs support is an excellent way to model attention to self-care and give others a chance to contribute something of value to the effort.

## Getting Support

School personnel should identify friends, family, and colleagues to talk with about the experience of supporting a grieving student. There may be times, however, when the support of family, friends, and colleagues is not the right match for the concerns at hand, or not sufficient on its own.

Consider seeking additional support when guilt, resentment, or personal grief is particularly strong or persistent, or when these or other feelings begin to interfere with personal or work life. In such situations, it may be best to seek the guidance of a bereavement specialist or mental health provider. This might be a consultant to the school or district, a mental health provider in the community, or an employee assistance program offered through work.



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

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