

Processing grief for a staff loss

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I. Consider where you are as you process a loss that involves another staff

- a. Vulnerability because of different layers of their own grief this year (because of COVID, being emotionally tired, layers of fear)?
- b. On an emotional brink
 - i. This has triggered something for me...
 - ii. I'm so reminded and afraid because I am a parent or grandparent of a child
 - iii. **We're reminded of the fragility of life.**
- c. Feeling very uncomfortable and vulnerable
- d. Feeling angry
- e. Feelings of guilt
- f. **Important to give yourself grace**

II. Grief's road

- a. Grief takes so many trails...and each has its own time frame. It cannot be rushed.
- b. Everyone reacts differently and can change to different reactions at different times or in response to many different things.
- c. You may be dealing with the loss of a student, the loss of a colleague's child (one of the most crushing losses), the loss of a colleague, the loss of your normal, the empathetic loss (as if it was your child, yourself, your parent).
- d. Feeling deep empathy for another.

III. Fears

- a. How can I reach out to them without bothering them?
 - i. *It hurts worse if people don't reach out, acknowledge their pain and loss, don't act out of fear...ask for forgiveness in advance because you don't know what they may need...*
- b. What if I say something that makes them feel worse?
 - i. *Another opportunity to ask for forgiveness in advance... "Please forgive me, in my ignorance or not knowing, if I say the wrong thing...I don't want to hurt you."*
- c. **We never can know what the triggers that drown them in grief again in a moment's notice...be ready. They do not always know or see those triggers coming either.**
- d. How do I find out how they are doing?
 - i. *Call, send a card...never be afraid to bring up the person who has died, they think about that person constantly and need to know you do, too.*

IV. What to say to the kids

- a. *You can say: "Parents usually don't die. But [child's name] mom [or dad] did."*

- i. *You can say, "Children usually don't die, but because of [event], [child's name] did die."*
- b. When they ask questions – always as honest as is appropriate and as they can handle (developmentally)
- c. When they say things inappropriately –
 - i. Explain: "This time is not only hard, but also scary for everyone and what you just said I believe you didn't really mean or didn't know it would come out that way..."
 - ii. Or: "I'm your teacher and I am taking this moment to teach you that what you said should never be said that way. If you want to say something, you must always first think about if you would say that with [the parent] here. I know you would not want to say anything that would hurt [them]."
 - 1. "Here is what you might say instead..."
 - iii. With the wee ones you can give definite boundaries: "We don't say that. It will hurt feelings. This is what you can say..."
- d. If a child says something that causes your antennae go up and you know it is a red flag that could mean something more serious, it is important to talk to the principal and anyone who needs to part of the conversation. Then decide on the next steps to bring in the parents. Always error on the side of safety.
- e. The kids need to feel safe, and they most likely feel the safest with their classroom teacher or another special teacher or staff person during times like this. Make those moments available.
 - i. After a significant loss in the school, every day for a while (particularly in the elementary school) it is important to have a circle time at the beginning, end (or both) of the day... (Middle and High Schools may create a different sort of designated place and time to allow kids to meet and then facilitate a time of healing.)
 - 1. Allows feelings to be expressed or explored
 - 2. Allows the student to know **you care about them**
 - a. You want to look at them (they are noticed by someone important in their world...YOU!)
 - b. This allows them to know someone heard and listened to their voice.
 - c. Builds a safe place for them to know they belong.
 - 3. Builds a place where:
 - a. you can ask them how they are doing...
 - b. that they can bring up anything they wonder about or are afraid about
 - ii. The power of 5 Radical Minutes (Cheri Lovre of The Crisis Institute)
<https://5radicalminutes.com/>

V. Help for returning teacher after loss

- a. Don't ask, "How are you doing?" That is exhausting, waring, and they will fill like they must be positive.

- a. Say, “[Staff name], it’s really good to see you.”
 - i. They will not need to respond. 😊
- b. Later they may want to talk about it with the staff...but maybe not at first.
 - i. They may tell you that you can ask how they are, but they will probably lie to you...
- c. Don’t say, “Can I give you a hug?” unless you are really close to the person.
- d. Deep down the person experiencing grief knows that most people come with truly good intention, but grief affects a grieving person differently from moment to moment.
- b. If they stare off into space during meetings, don’t worry and **just give them grace.**
 - a. Work helps because it gives them routine and purpose.
- c. Prep the kids by letting them know that the teacher or staff person may be sad for a while. They may cry or have red eyes. But they will also show happiness, too.
 - a. They may want to talk about it and they may not. (For young and old.)
- d. The kids can make cards. It gives them something they can do for the teacher/staff. They will not have to read them yet, just let them take the cards home.
- e. Instead of always saying, “Is there anything we can do?” Bring a meal to the staff refrigerator for them to take home and say, “There is a meal in the frig for you to take home.” Or whatever you want...just do it and not always ask, “What can we do for you?” A few trusted and close friends may be able to give cues.
- f. Watch how many questions are asked that need answers at first. They will be so mentally and emotionally exhausted.
- g. They may not make eye contact....it will help cope for a while.
- h. Give them grace...and a lot of love (even from inside of you!)

VI. Tools –

- a. Helping your fellow staff person is a way to help you heal, too.
- b. Each of you may share your heart in different ways: doing – meals, coffee dates, errands, gifts; or you may be one who shares by talking – expression with words and cards
- c. Writing
 - i. Writing makes it possible to turn our own experience and wisdom into nourishment and wisdom for others.
- d. “Copers” for you – hobbies, those things that you love to do where time goes away...
- e. Keeping you emotionally and physically balanced:
 - i. Eating – fresh fruits and veggies/lots of water to flush the toxins that build up from stress
 - ii. Exercise – the natural anti-depressant.
- f. Self-talk
- g. Reframing
- h. Gratitude – 3 things before getting out of bed
- i. Laughter – *laughter tears have the same endorphin release as tears of sadness*
- j. Find someone to bear witness to your pain, your thoughts, your guilt, your anger

VII. Conclusion

- a. Please feel free to email me and let me know if you have questions you want to talk about anything... krismeyer55@gmail.com or meyer2@bvu.edu.
- b. Quote
 - i. "One day you will tell your story of how you've overcome what you're going through now, and it will become part of someone else's survival guide."