

Dealing with the Empty Desk

Meeting with the Classmates of the Deceased

The classmates of the deceased are one of the groups most affected by a sudden death. Even if they were not part of that student’s friendship circle, these students are visually confronted by the tangible reminder of an empty desk in the classroom. It is hard for them to even momentarily deny the reality that something terrible has happened.

The teachers in these classrooms also tend to be affected by the death in a more personal and immediate way than their colleagues who had little or no contact with the deceased. And, unfortunately, just seeing this name on the attendance roster or listed in a grade book will continually remind the teacher about the tragic loss.

But what should be done for these classes on that day when the death is discovered? Clearly classmates need more support than the general student body. The ideal response is to have at least two members of the crisis team follow the daily schedule of the deceased, offering support in a structured way to these teachers and students. With two team members in attendance, there is the option to escort any student who is too upset to remain in the class to one of the care stations where he or she can get individualized support.

Your goal in reaching out to each of these classes personally is not to provide a counseling group or what is called a “crisis debriefing.” Your role is essential but limited:

- to acknowledge the more personal impact on the students who saw the deceased every day
- to provide an opportunity to discuss their immediate reactions to the news of the death
- to encourage them to take care of themselves and each other
- to alert them to additional supportive resources in the school and in the community

Here is a suggested format for addressing the needs of these teachers and students:

- Greet the teacher and acknowledge the personal and professional impact of the loss. (“I know Andrew was in your class and that you may be more affected by his death than those of us who did not see him every day.”)
- Explain that you would like to meet with the class to help them work through their immediate reactions. Suggest that the teacher can choose to contribute to the discussion or can participate by simply listening. For teachers who are emotionally affected by the death, not having to process their students’ reactions can be a big relief. Other teachers may want to be fully engaged in the discussion. Either option—or somewhere in between—is absolutely fine.

- Greet the class and acknowledge the immediate impact of the death as well. (“I know Andrew was in this class, so you may notice his absence today more than many of the other students in the school. For those of you who knew Andrew personally, I am so sorry for your loss.”)
- Reiterate the school’s official statement to students about the death. Students may interject other information (“Well, I heard . . . ” or “Last night he told . . .”), but be careful not to get caught up in what may be rumors or gossip. Even if this information turns out to be accurate, it is not part of the school’s official statement, so it should not be validated.
- Acknowledge that there will be an increasing amount of information circulating throughout the day, and remind the students to be careful about what they choose to believe, since rumors often surface to fill gaps in information.
- Ask the class to point out the student’s desk and ask them to share their reactions to seeing it empty. This is a gentle, indirect way to explore their reactions to the death. Expect a wide range of responses. Do not insist that every student respond to your question. Remember that for some students, publicly sharing their feelings about the death may add another level of upset and anxiety. If you do notice students who seem especially quiet, approach these students privately or ask the teacher to talk with them to check out their reactions at the end of the class.
- You can expect a great deal of shock and disbelief to dominate this initial discussion. Explain to the students that once these initial reactions pass, they can expect that other feelings might surface. Although you do not want to predict responses, suggest that the range of emotions can include anger (“I can’t believe he could have done that”), sadness (“OMG, I am so upset I don’t know what to say or do”), and confusion (“I keep trying to figure out why this happened”).
- If the death was a suicide, initial responses can reflect guilt and feelings of responsibility (“I’ll never forgive myself for not taking him seriously” or “If only I’d been friendlier to him . . . ”). Listen to these responses, but remind the students that the student’s life ultimately belonged to him or her—the choice, as terrible as it was, was his or hers alone.
- Discuss the ways in which the students can help each other in their grief. Encourage them to be supportive, alert, and responsible. (“You can help each other now by looking out for your friends and classmates. If you notice anybody doing or saying anything that concerns you, please tell a resource person at school or an adult you trust outside of school. We all need to watch out for each other more closely at a time like this.”)

- Acknowledge that the next few days may be difficult for members of the class. Also recognize that some of the students may have minimal reactions, and validate that all feelings are normal. Explain that extra resources will be available in the school and community during the next several days to help everyone in the school get through what may be a difficult time.
- Give the students—and the teacher—permission to contact you personally if they feel the need to talk or would just like a little extra support and direction. Teachers sometimes ask for help in structuring class assignments or in addressing curriculum materials that touch on the circumstances of the death. Provide them with the *Lifelines Postvention* handout *Dealing with Suicide-Related Curriculum* from chapter 3.

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