



# COVID-19 Guidance for Schools and Districts on Virtual Response to Loss & Bereavement

May 4, 2020

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This document has been prepared to help schools and districts respond to the loss of a student, faculty member or community member during COVID-19.

## Communicate information about the death to your school community:

- The crisis response lead, school counselor, school social worker, school psychologist, teacher or principal should call students, families and staff members closely connected to the loss to inform them of the death. Demonstrate empathy during these conversations; don't just try to "be strong."
  - Be simple and straightforward. Be brief and patient. You might have to answer the same question multiple times and repeat key information to ensure understanding.
  - Listen, acknowledge feelings and be nonjudgmental and reassuring.
  - Express your own feelings in an open, calm and appropriate way that encourages students and adults to share their feelings and grief.
  - Discuss death in developmentally appropriate terms for students and caregivers. Use words such as "death," "die" or "dying" in your conversations and avoid euphemisms such as "they went away," "they are sleeping," "departed" and "passed away," since they can be confusing, especially for younger children. This is good modeling for caregivers to be able to use clear, developmentally appropriate language with their children.
- School leadership (principal and/or superintendent) should send an official letter or email informing the full school community of the death and explaining resources available to support students, families and staff. For an example, see this [template for a letter to a school community about a death](#). Remember that if you plan to share the name of the person who died, you must get permission from the family.

## Provide virtual support to students and families:

- Create opportunities for students, staff and families to connect with one another. School counselors and other school mental health professionals in the district should schedule and host drop-in virtual meeting times for people who want to share their feelings with others or find support in connecting with others. People may be reluctant to reach out for help, so it can be useful for mental health staff to proactively check in with individuals to see how they are doing. You may want some staff-only spaces, as well as some parent-only meetings.



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- Educate caregivers, students and staff about the normal grieving process. Provide developmentally appropriate information about the different stages of grief, the amount of time the process takes, coping strategies and resources available to grieving individuals. Remind them that youth may respond to grief in a variety of ways and there is no right or wrong way to deal with grief unless it includes hurting oneself, others or property.
- Actively listen and offer nonjudgmental support to students, caregivers and staff to assist in creating a plan to manage their grief.
- Suggest, teach and practice coping techniques, especially ways to cope during social distancing, ideas to overcome and ways to adjust to life after loss.
- Help students find a way to memorialize the deceased. This may be through letter writing, bibliotherapy, play therapy, art therapy or music therapy. If students are writing letters to give to family members of the deceased, an adult should review the content before sending them to the family.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences between diverse students, families and staff in expressing grief and honoring the dead. You may need to make interpreters or multilingual mental health professionals available.
- Avoid making assumptions and imposing your own beliefs on students.

## **Create virtual means for the community to grieve and share memories:**

- Create a virtual wall for people to post positive memories for the student, staff member or teacher through a platform like [padlet.com](https://padlet.com).
- Share ways to honor the deceased student, staff or teacher by sending condolences to the family.
- Consider a virtual celebration of life if the family would like this.

## **Monitor responses and provide additional support as needed:**

- Remind parents/guardians to pay attention to their child's behavior. Provide information about signs and symptoms that may indicate their child needs additional support:
  - Talk or actions indicating thoughts of harming self or others;
  - Inability to attend to daily activities;
  - Persistent crying, agitation, fear or clinging to adults; and
  - Unable to sleep or eat for extended periods of time.
- If students' expressions include risk to self (e.g. suicidal thoughts, cutting) or others, take the statements seriously and refer them immediately to the appropriate professionals.



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- Provide school staff, students and families with information about the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), [Crisis Text Line](#) and the [Kentucky Office of Homeland Security tip line](#). Provide staff, students and families with information about local hospice and mental health agencies.
- School counselors, social workers, psychologists and administrators should collaborate with community behavioral health providers to develop a smooth referral process for students and others who may consider harming themselves or others after this death.
- Provide teachers with the referral procedures for students requiring additional support.
- Pay close attention to students who witnessed the death, have experienced recent deaths or key life changes or who have experienced trauma.

## Take care of yourself:

- Recognize that working continually with those who are grieving can take a toll emotionally on counselors and educators.
- Certain losses experienced by others will remind us of our own losses. It is important to review our own experiences, not only in order to understand and respond effectively to the grief of others, but also to ensure we are adequately aware of and attending to our own grief.
- If you yourself are deeply affected by this loss, be prepared to get help while still ensuring students or others you are working with get support.

## Resources:

- Child Mind Institute: [“Helping Children Cope with Grief”](#)
- Child Mind Institute (Rachel Ehmke): [“Helping Children Deal with Grief”](#)
- The Dougy Center: [“How to Help a Grieving Child”](#)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP): [“Addressing Grief: Brief Facts and Tips”](#)
- National Alliance for Grieving Children: [“10 Ways to Help a Grieving Child”](#)
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement: [“Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff”](#)
- National Education Association: [NEA’s School Crisis Guide](#). (April 6, 2020). See Pages 50-56.



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*\* The Kentucky Department of Education consulted with Kentucky Academic & Behavioral Response to Intervention, the University of the Cumberlands and community members to produce this guidance document.*

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