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Frequently Asked Questions

Grief Sensitivity Virtual Learning Institute: Beyond Sorry for Your Loss: Supporting Students on Their Grief Journey (Part 2)

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The following are several frequently asked questions from the webinar. See the [webinar recording](#) and [slide deck](#) for more information.

Participant Question & Presenters' Response

Q1 What if you feel you are too empathetic and have difficulty controlling your own emotions? Not what if *they* cry, but what if I cry?

A1 Thank you for your vulnerability about your own reactions. Remember that awareness is an important first step in dealing with your own emotions which can be distracting in the support process. We suggest that you actively look for ways to create a reflective space for you to sort out your own feelings, including journaling, mindfulness activities, and seeking out reflective supervision. Another practical suggestion is to create a reflective buffer time right before and right after a session with this student. Consider implementing a transitional ritual before and after the session to help you deal with the emotions and to take care of yourself. If it continues to be too overwhelming, consider seeking out therapy for yourself. Also, consider to what extent grief work is a good fit for yourself and what support you need in order to continue this type of work.

Q2 What techniques can be used for losses other than death?

A2 Most, if not all, of the techniques mentioned in this webinar can be used for losses other than death. In "establishing safety", giving permission to talk about the loss continues to be important. While we may not need to explain death, providing psychoeducation about what a loss is and the natural response to losses in general will be helpful. When supporting someone in "dealing with the emotions", focus on identifying feelings surrounding the specific loss. Coping strategies can be tailored to regulating emotions when remembering the specific loss. Similarly, when working with someone on "making sense of it", we focus on the specific loss. The intervention to draw "before-and-after" pictures can be applied to what it was like before the loss versus after the loss. When trying to support someone in "living with the loss beyond the loss", similar activities as described can be used to support the "remembering" process of what was lost, including a memory box of my old school or of my life before my parents' divorce.

Q3 If a student has multiple losses, do we try focus on one loss at a time or make it collective?

A3 It is often easier to start with one loss by asking the student to identify the one loss that has been the most impactful in his/her life. However, it is important to not lose sight of how losses are more than often connected. We shared an analogy in the presentation about starting with looking at one tree in the forest. When starting with the identified loss, support the student in making connections in themes emerging from multiple losses. The use of a timeline may be helpful as a way to start to consider the whole picture of the multiple losses. If the losses are found to be intertwined, an idea is to have the student create a life story in which they describe their "journey."

Q4 What is the best way that you have found in guiding caregivers of how to have the dialogue regarding those difficult deaths; such as suicide, overdose, homicide when caregivers are very against telling the children about how a person died.



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A4 The suggested approach when explaining death to a child is always with honest and real language that can be understood for their developmental level. Provide rationale for why honest language is the most helpful for the child. Emphasize that the family's view can be explained to the student as well. Support the caregiver in understanding why it would not be helpful for the child to not be told about how the person died. When the death is stigmatizing for social, cultural, and religious reasons, it is important that providers acknowledge the caregiver's intention in protecting the child and wanting the best for the child. We have found it helpful to reflect back the caregiver's own feelings surrounding the death to process those feelings. Try to explore what their fears and worries are surrounding the child knowing the truth. Provide psychoeducation and utilize cognitive processing about those fears and worries, while remaining accepting and non-judgmental. Think through with them how to respond to the child's questions. Reassure them that we are going to be there to support them and their child.

Q5 How would you work with students from a culture where death is not to be discussed because it is a taboo?

A5 In this situation, it is essential again to remain accepting and non-judgmental. It may be helpful to identify the specific culture, and seek consultations surrounding the specific culture. In some cultures, processing grief may be in other ways other than talking, such as in movement or in art, etc. Generally, approach the topic with humility, inquiring for the student to explain from their perspectives why death is not to be discussed in their culture. This process may help the student in thinking through why it is a taboo and what the beliefs are surrounding the consequences of talking about death. Praise often for helping the provider understand, and in the process, use self-monitoring to help the student notice their own bodily reactions to talking about it. Provide psychoeducation about the importance of meaning making in processing grief, while reassuring the student that we will only go when they are ready and at the pace that they can tolerate. In situation like these, involvement of the caregiver is often the key. Work with the caregiver, and it is helpful to support the caregiver to "give permission" to the student to talk (or draw, or dance) about the grief.

Q6 When we are honoring an avoidance reaction, but they continue to avoid and will not open up how should we proceed?

A6 This is a great question because as much as we want to honor the pace in processing grief, we do not want to reinforce the avoidance. How much to push and how to step back will be a clinical decision based on the particular student. Start by providing psychoeducation about avoidance reaction to normalize that as our body's way to try to protect ourselves. Then we can follow up with analogies about why this avoidance is not working in our best favor overtime and may indeed bring more harm or pain. Examples of analogies can include putting a band-aid over a wound without cleaning it, pushing dirty laundry under the bed, or trying to get into the pool when the water feels cold. Establish a good self-monitoring system with the student to communicate their comfort level with us, assuring them that we will respect their needs. If they continue to avoid, get a commitment to take a small step that is within their comfort level, with the intention to gradually increase that overtime. In the practice of exposure, we incorporate the idea of "stepping back without backing down" to ensure that we are not reinforcing the avoidance. For example, if talking about the person's death is too difficult right now, can we tolerate talking about memories about the person for 5 minutes this time? This is followed by tons of praise, and we make the connection that they were able to tolerate it without falling apart. We establish a plan for maybe increasing that to talking for 10 minutes. Using a tool like a "Fear Ladder" to identify the different levels of what would be tolerable may be helpful to collaboratively establish an agreed upon plan. Celebrate small steps, and acknowledge how difficult the process it. Another important thing to consider is whether we as providers own any part of that avoidance. As discussed in the presentation, ask ourselves what our own barriers are in supporting students in their grief journey. Reflect on our internal reaction about the idea of tolerating a student talking about something that is difficult, and ask ourselves whether we truly believe that it will be supportive to them to process their grief reactions.



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Other Resources

Books:

- It's OK that You're Not OK – Devine, M.
- Modern Loss: Candid Conversations about Grief – Soffer and Birkner
- Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy – Worden, W.

Children's Books:

- The Thing about Jellyfish – Benjamin, A.
- **The Rabbit Listened** - Doerrfeld, C.
- When Someone Very Special Dies: Children Can Learn to Cope with Grief (Drawing Out Feelings Series) – Heegaard, M.
- The Sad Dragon: A Dragon Book about Grief and Loss – Herman, S.
- The Invisible String – Karst, P.
- When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death – Krasny Brown, L.; Brown, M.
- Eddie's Brave Journey: How One Little Elephant Learned All about Grief – Pearlman Wolfson, R.
- **Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children** - Mellonie, B., Ingpen, R.
- The Memory Box: A Book about Grief – Rowland, J.
- Brave Bart: A Story for Traumatized and Grieving Children – Sheppard, C.
- **I Miss You: A First Look at Death** - Thomas, P.

Other Resources:

- Sesame Street in Communities – Topic: Helping Kids Grieve
 - <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>
- Our House Grief Support Center
 - <https://www.ourhouse-grief.org/grief-pages/>
- The Dougy Center
 - <https://www.dougy.org>
- Supporting children with traumatic grief – article for educators – Cohen
 - <https://tfcbt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/SPI4008271.pdf>

Notable Instagram Accounts on the Topic of Grief:

- @griefandgrits – Randi Pearlman Wolfson
- @refugeingrief – Megan Devine
- @snapshotsoflifeafterloss – a photo/video project
- @griefkid – the grief journey of Grief Kid through fun sketches



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