

Commemoration and Memorialization

Take-Home Message

Memorial and commemorative activities can be helpful to students and staff. However, it is essential that schools give careful consideration to policies and practices to ensure that activities are appropriate and address the needs of the school community.

It's also important to engage students in planning memorial activities. This helps ensure the activities are appropriate to the interests of the students and responsive to their needs.

Memorials and Commemorative Activities as a School Community Response

The wish to develop memorials and commemorative activities is common following deaths that touch many members of a community. When a death occurs in the school community, these activities help students to:

- communicate at a public level their connection and attachment to the person who died
- express and cope with difficult feelings that may otherwise seem overwhelming and difficult to deal with on their own
- realize that they are not alone in having strong feelings
- draw on the support of peers and adults in the school community
- begin to find some meaning in the loss
- feel reconnected to beliefs that may have been shaken by the experience
- learn coping strategies that have worked for others, and share their own coping approaches with peers

Schools Should Set Appropriate Guidelines

Schools should give careful consideration to ensure that any policies and procedures followed to commemorate a death support the needs of the students who are grieving as well as heed safety concerns. Any activities should:

- be thoughtful
- be respectful of the diversity of views and needs of students and staff
- include students in some part of the planning or development process

- be capable of being readily applied fairly and consistently across a wide range of contexts involving the death of a member of the school community (see “Set Appropriate Precedents,” on the next page)

Schools should also consider how to coordinate their activities with plans for commemorative or memorial activities in the larger community. It may be helpful to invite religious, cultural, civic, or other community leaders to assist in this process.

How Is More Important Than What

What is planned for a memorial or commemorative activity is far less critical than how the school goes about the planning process. For these activities to be helpful, it is critical that students play a central role in planning events. This ensures that the activities are relevant to students' interests and responsive to their needs.

Simply stated, a commemorative or memorial event planned by adults for children is likely to be helpful to the adults rather than the children.

When children plan and take part in these activities, they can exercise some control over how they choose to remember and honor the person who died. They have a say in the ways they recognize what was lost or permanently altered by the death. They can take action that helps them determine how they wish to acknowledge any associated crisis event—a violent incident, a tragic accident, or a formidable natural disaster, for example.

When someone close to us dies, we feel powerless and vulnerable. Helping children feel some sense of control over the response to the death lessens these feelings.



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Listen to Students

It is sometimes tempting for school staff to tell students what they are probably feeling at the moment, or suggest the best ways to express their feelings and remember the deceased. However, this is not helpful.

Instead, allow students to discuss in small groups their thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to identify collectively a helpful and meaningful way to commemorate the life of the person. Even young students are capable of having these conversations and coming up with appropriate ideas. Often, what students choose will rely on thoughtful and symbolic activities that are more meaningful and expressive than the suggestions of staff. This is more therapeutic for them as survivors.

Set Appropriate Precedents

Death in a school community can occur in a number of different ways. It is important for schools to choose policies and guidelines that can be applied appropriately under any circumstances.

In general, it is best to avoid legacy memorials, such as placing a plaque in the hallway or planting a tree, or choosing a memorial effort that requires raising substantial funds. These are precedents that the school won't wish to apply consistently to all possible future deaths.

For example, the friend of a child who dies of cancer may question why more attention was given to a star athlete who died from an injury during a football game. Classmates of a student who dies by suicide or a drug overdose may resent that this death is not acknowledged with a plaque.

Formal permanent markers may also be vandalized, damaged, or fall into disrepair. Years later, few students or even staff may have any personal connection to or memory of the person who died.



Trees and other living memorials may die or fail to thrive. This can be distressing to family members and friends of the deceased.

In addition, these types of physical reminders can sometimes have unintended negative connotations for students. For example, if a school within a community with a high rate of violence decides to memorialize by planting a tree within a “peace garden” for each student who dies, surviving students may come to see the growing number of trees as more of a body count than a memorial. The garden becomes a constant reminder that they live in a violent neighborhood. They may wonder when their own tree will be planted.

Give It Time

It is important to allow sufficient time and space in which members of the school community can identify and understand their thoughts and emotions about a death. Often, students and staff rush to plan commemorative and memorial activities, sometimes beginning such discussions hours, or even minutes, after hearing the news of the death.

These individuals are struggling to cope with the absence of the person who died. However, this rush to commemoration may divert attention from addressing the acute emotional needs of the broader school community. It can give the false appearance that the school is attempting to reach closure prematurely. This is likely to discourage students from continuing to share their feelings and receive the support necessary to adjust to and cope with the loss.

Be Aware of Social Media

Students increasingly utilize social media as a means to commemorate and memorialize those who have died. They might continue to post messages to a deceased student's personal site, or create a new site for this purpose.

It is important that schools be aware of any such sites used or visited by students for this purpose. Speak with students to gain information about what is being communicated. The goal is not to police the site, but rather to maintain a level of general awareness.

Ask students to bring any comments that are worrisome, destructive, or troubling to the attention of an adult—for example, suicidal or homicidal intentions, or comments about the deceased that are highly critical.

The module on Social Media provides more information on this topic.

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Manage Spontaneous Memorials

When schools do not engage students in the process of planning for commemorative and memorial activities, there is a greater risk that spontaneous, informal memorials will appear in the school or community. These might include collections of notes, flowers, photos, stuffed animals, or something associated with the interests of the person who died. It may also involve the writing of messages and notes directly on the student's locker or desk, or at the site of death.

Often, these spontaneous memorials appear almost immediately after notification occurs. When this happens, it is important to communicate appropriate limits. For example, no permanent writing on property may be permitted. Objects left at the memorial cannot be perishable or pose a risk to safety (e.g., lit candles, alcoholic beverages).

If on school grounds, the memorial may not block exits, hallways, or access to student lockers. Temporary memorials should generally not be in locations where all students pass regularly, such as cafeterias or main hallways. If necessary, work with students to relocate a temporary memorial to another site.

Monitor the site regularly. Inappropriate material, whether written comments or objects, should be removed promptly.

Discuss with students how long such a memorial will be left in place (generally, a few days to a week). Let them know when they may have access to the memorial and what will happen with the items left at the site. For example, the family of the deceased student might be offered a special scrapbook created using photos taken of the memorial.

It is useful to involve students in these plans as much as possible. This helps students feel that decisions made are respectful of their wishes.

Spontaneous memorials constructed in the community can be problematic, especially if they are placed in dangerous locations, such as busy intersections or railroad tracks where the student died. These also may become sites for future risk-taking behaviors, including substance abuse.

Discuss Memorial Plans With Students

School staff may want to arrange thoughtful discussions with students about appropriate means of commemoration. This can help shift students' focus to memorials that are appropriate in the school setting and more easily supervised by school staff.

Staff sometimes worry that memorial and commemorative

activities, and discussions about planning such activities, will be upsetting to students and staff. Remember, it is the death itself that is upsetting, not discussions about the death.

Nevertheless, these conversations may sometimes expose underlying distress in some students. Sometimes, discussions about a crisis lead people to reflect on other troubling experiences in their lives. These won't necessarily be related to the current event.

Schools should therefore notify families of students in the class or school prior to memorial events or planning efforts. This allows parents the chance to bring relevant family experiences to the school's attention. For example, they may have a young child who recently experienced the death of a relative, a teen who is struggling with depression and suicidal feelings, or a frightening immigration experience where the entire family escaped serious violence in their home country.

Parents can also have discussions at home with their children about the ways the school will memorialize the life of the deceased.

Further information on how to anticipate and address situations that may inadvertently remind students of prior loss and trauma can be found in the module on Grief Triggers.

Respect Different Needs and Interests

Individuals often have very different needs and interests concerning commemoration.

A child whose brother died in a fire may be confused that more focus seems to be given to the heroic efforts of rescue workers. Children who have lost friends or family previously may resent what they perceive as much greater attention given



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to this current death. Family members and close friends of the deceased may advocate for more extensive, formal, or permanent efforts than the school has planned.

Some children who have not been deeply affected by the death may simply be uninterested in giving this particular incident a great deal of attention. They might resent having their school experience defined by an event that did not actually touch them in a meaningful way.

Those who have different needs deserve to have their views respected. Sometimes students feel they are being coerced to participate in memorial activities that do not reflect their interests or needs. Children who are uncomfortable about attending a memorial, or prefer not to participate, should feel free to choose not to go.

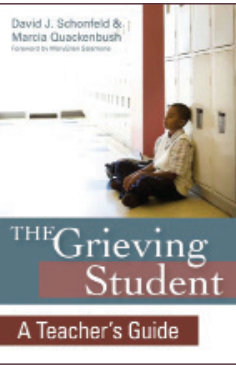
Well-planned commemorative and memorial activities, appropriately managed and monitored, can be very helpful

to students and staff as they grieve the death of a member of the school community. Because there may be many different preferences about how to best commemorate an individual, establishing a tolerance for a wide diversity of needs is important. This demonstrates to students and staff how to compromise and respect differences—an important life lesson for all to learn.

Use Guidance From Other Modules

The module on Social Media provides further background on the use of social media for commemoration and memorialization.

Grief Triggers describes grief triggers and outlines effective ways to plan for these reactions and give students appropriate support.



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

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