

# Impact on Learning

## Take-Home Message

Temporary academic challenges are common among grieving students and should be anticipated. Teachers and other school staff can provide proactive support and modifications in academic expectations, homework assignments, and testing. This can provide tremendous help to grieving students at a time when they are struggling to understand and cope with a death.

## Expect Temporary Challenges

It is common for children to experience academic challenges after the death of a family member or close friend. These may occur immediately after the death. They might also first appear weeks or even months later. Preexisting learning challenges often become worse in the aftermath of a loss.

Typical experiences for grieving students include:

- Difficulty concentrating and distractibility
- Limitations in learning and/or remembering new facts or concepts
- Anxiety, sadness, and sleeping difficulties—all of which contribute to difficulty learning

## Offer Support Proactively

It's important for school professionals to offer academic support proactively. Don't wait for students to begin demonstrating academic challenges, or for academic challenges to become academic failure.

Schools can be a source of valuable support to grieving students. However, if academic expectations temporarily

exceed students' capacity to learn, schools are more likely to become an additional source of distress.

## Helpful Modifications

Assist grieving students in identifying the level of academic work that feels appropriate and achievable. Some helpful modifications include:

- Change an assignment. There are many ways to adapt assignments to better match grieving students' current ability to focus. For example, allow a student to work on a project with a partner rather than solo. Suggest a student adapt a formal research paper into a more engaging assignment, such as an oral history project or a video. Offer a student the chance to defer an oral presentation and submit a written assignment instead.
- Change the focus or timing of a lesson. A literature class might choose a different book to discuss if the one originally scheduled describes a death similar to the one a student is currently grieving. A health class on the dangers of substance abuse might be postponed, or the grieving student excused, if he has just lost a sibling to a drug overdose.
- Reschedule or adapt tests. Immediately after a death, students might be exempted from some testing, or given modifications such as testing alone in a quiet location with extra time. Scores might be omitted or weighted less in determining final grades.

It's important for teachers to find a balance between maintaining reasonable expectations and being ready to provide additional support and accommodation for grieving students. Students need to be appropriately prepared to move ahead to their next grade. If they are promoted without learning the essential facts and concepts of their grade, they will be at a disadvantage the following year, when new teachers may be unaware of their losses.

## Students Who Cope Exceptionally Well

Some grieving students actually engage more actively in their schoolwork after a death. They may do so to distract themselves from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings related to the death, to compensate for some imagined fault, or to reassure adults—and themselves—that they are doing well at a time when others worry that they will become overwhelmed.

Adults may view this as resilience, but the appearance of



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coping is often maintained at a great personal price to the student. Ultimately, this level of work may be difficult to sustain. It may mask underlying distress that would benefit from assistance.

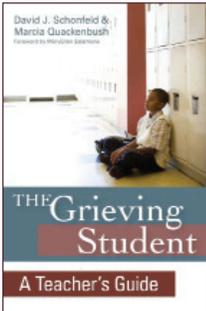
It is important to explore any significant change in academic function.

## Use Guidance From Other Modules

Other modules in this course provide guidance that will be helpful when planning modifications for students' academic work.

Connecting With Families underscores the importance of collaborating with families to support students' adjustment both at school and at home. Understanding how the family is coping can provide useful insights on how to modify homework or test preparation.

Coordinating Services and Supporting Transitions offers advice on how school professionals working with a grieving student can work together as a supportive team. The team can assess the student's cumulative workload, identify ways to balance academic demands with extracurricular activities, and share ideas among teachers and the family on how to best support the student.



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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