

THE ISSUE OF STAFF GRIEF

Responsibility for carrying out the postvention plan is on the shoulders of various school staff members, some of whom will have known, perhaps been close to, the student who died.

Other key staff may be experiencing painful turmoil in their own lives. A student's death will cast grief over the school. The staff will be trying to help students cope with grief. The first principle of grief work is to be aware of and pay attention to one's own grieving process. The nature and strength of a teacher's feelings will affect—perhaps to help, perhaps to interfere with—students' grief.

Therefore, to best prepare for postvention following a death, the crisis response team, cognizant of staff being (intended or not) role models for student grief, should organize an in-service training day focusing on the losses, grieving styles, coping mechanisms, and feelings about death experienced by staff members. The in-service should contain two sessions, one didactic and the other experiential, and be conducted by the crisis consultant.

The didactic portion should consist of an explanation of grief and the process people go through when a loved one dies. Issues such as how long the grieving process may take, phases one goes through, feelings of going crazy as a normal part of grief, what helps and what to say to people in grief, and especially the influence of coping with past losses or current reaction to death should be discussed.

Experientially, the session should help people become aware of their own grieving process—their own unique ways of coping with loss and death. In pairs, triads, or small groups, each person may be asked to think back over his/her life about the losses he/she suffered (to death or otherwise), to describe one or two of these losses, share how he/she reacted, coped and grieved during those times, and recall what helped or didn't help.

There are two reasons for this exercise. First, people grieve a current death in much the way they've grieved other losses in their lives. When death occurs, people don't leisurely decide how they're going to grieve; they react immediately and begin to respond the only way they know how, the way they've learned over years of coping with losses. People don't change their style of grieving in a crisis; so focusing on one's grieving style will provide a good indication of how that person will react when a student death occurs. Thus, staff can know what to expect from themselves and what they'll need in the crisis.

Second, people have a tendency to judge others through their own eyes and hence assume that other people will or should react to and grieve the death they way they do. This tendency is nearly always unhelpful and interferes with the staff member's ability to respond to student or other staff needs following the earthquake. Awareness of one's own grieving tendency makes it more likely that he/she can set that tendency aside for a time and be open to helping other people cope in their own way.

Knowledge about grief in general and one's own grief in particular, will increase the self-confidence of staff members, thus enabling them to talk with, listen to, and help students in the aftermath of an earthquake.

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