

## How to Talk About Traumatic Events and Tragedies

### Talking with Students about Grief

Grief comes in many forms, and affects both students and adults in school. The death of a student or staff member who has attended a school can disrupt the learning environment for many students, whether they knew the person personally or not. A suicide completion can be particularly difficult to address. State, national and international trauma and violence can also disrupt the learning environment.

The challenge in helping students cope with death is that such events can also be sad for many adults. Here are some reminders on how to talk about grief.

**Adults' Role** Try to be calm and focused for the students. Adults need to get the support they need from other adults so we are able to effectively guide them.

**Talk and Listen** Find out what students' fears and concerns are and address them as directly and calmly as possible. Reassure them that adults are there to help and to protect. Circles are ways to help students talk about their feelings and to help identify what they can do to cope. A circle also gives adults time to look at and listen to each student, and note how they are coping. Share any concern about non-verbal communication or extreme behavior—very quiet or very upset—to the student support staff before the end of the day.

**Routine, Physical Activity and Play** After giving students time to talk, return to the regular school routine. Maintain schedules for physical activity and play, if you have those as part of the school day. Consider including opportunities for physical activity in the classroom, or before and after school. Physical, whole body play, especially done outside, can help to refresh the students and release endorphins and other chemicals in the body that increase resiliency.

**Use Your Resources** School staff should remember that there are community groups and organizations that are willing and able to help you talk to children, including counselors, members of the faith community, mental health agencies, public health, and sexual assault and domestic abuse programs. Pay attention to your needs, and to the needs of the students.

### Circle of Understanding

To restore the learning environment after a student or staff death or a state or national event that is disruptive, it can be helpful to make time for discussions with students and staff about what happened, and what resources

are available for all. Here is a suggested format for a classroom or group discussion. It is helpful for staff to practice holding the circle by going through the process with each other, before circling up with students. If a staff member is not comfortable holding the circle, perhaps they can join with someone who is.

### ***Set-Up:***

Sit in a circle so all participants can see each other free from barriers and are equal distance from the center of the circle. If you cannot move desks, hold a standing circle. As a final option, pass the talking piece up and down the rows.

### ***Process:***

The circle keeper/facilitator responsibilities: Keep the circle, which means to welcome all and help the circle be a safe place for everyone. Introduce the common courtesies and talking piece. Prepare participants for the circle and read or provide the opening, closing and questions for the circle. If necessary, and when it is the keeper's turn to speak, remind participants they are in circle and to respect the process and each other.

Use a "talking piece" (something of meaning/significance to the circle keeper or to the participants; whoever has the talking piece can talk when s/he has it; whoever doesn't have the talking piece listens - without interruption – verbal or physical). The adult can then see everyone as the talking piece goes around the circle.

Go in order around the circle; pass the talking piece to the left from the "keeper" of the circle; from person to person in order around the circle, not to whoever wants to say something in the moment.

### **Circle Guidelines**

- Speak in I statements: "I think, I feel, I believe"
- Respect the talking piece and each other,
- Speak and listen from the heart – be open to what each person has to say.
- Be brief so each person can talk.
- A person may pass.
- What is said in circle of a personal nature stays in circle. Circle is confidential unless someone is being hurt; may hurt themselves or is hurting others. Then the adult needs to talk with you privately to see how you can be helped, and may ask other adults to help as well.

### **Tips for Keepers:**

- Allow students to pass, or just hold the talking piece for a while, before passing it on. Send the talking piece around more than once for the same question. Some students will not speak the first time around, but they may the second, or third.
- Wait until the talking piece comes back to you to reinforce positive social norms and values of the group, even if anti-social statements are made.
- Recognize that difficult feelings are normal, natural and need to be expressed, but need to be handled respectfully and in a manner that de-escalates conflict rather than fuels it.
- Give accurate information about the suicide as you know it. Do not talk about the method. Talking about the method can create images that are upsetting and it may increase the risk of imitative behavior by

vulnerable youth.

### **Script**

Opening The Circle: Welcome, everyone, to the circle. Please sit with both feet on the floor, and pay attention to your breathing. Take a deep breath from your diaphragm until you feel your lungs fill completely. Slowly release the air through pursed lips as if you are blowing out a straw. Do this three times.

Let us review the circle guidelines for our talk today:

- Speak in I statements; I think, I feel, I believe
- Respect the talking piece—when you have it you may speak and when you don't you may listen • Speak and listen from the heart – be open to what each person has to say
- Take the time you need knowing others need time
- You may pass.
- What is said in circle of a personal nature stays in circle. Circle is confidential unless someone is being hurt; either someone is hurting themselves or is hurting others.

**Check-in:** I am going to send around this talking piece. Let me tell you about this talking piece, and why I chose it for our circle today (explain).

When you get the talking piece, it is your turn to speak. Some people call it a listening piece; because it directs you to the person you can listen to. This will go around the circle in order. When you get the talking piece, please say your name, the pronouns that make you feel seen, and one thing that you saw this morning on the way to school. I will start. My name is-, my pronouns are- and I saw-.

(When the talking piece comes back to you, the keeper, you can note all the interesting little (or big) things that we can see in life if we just pay attention, if we just look.)

**Opening Statement:** I want to talk with you today about \_\_\_\_\_. I want to take time to hear from you what you think or feel or need to know. What has happened to \_\_\_\_\_ is sad and painful. What we know at this point is:\_\_\_\_\_.

When bad or scary things happen it helps to take a big breath or whatever it is you do to help calm down. Pay attention to the facts and pay attention to how you feel.

It is still important for you, the students and me to be able to express our feelings and share our thoughts and concerns. Let us go around the classroom (or circle) and talk about what has happened.

**Round One:** So I am wondering, where were you when you heard this news? What did you think at the time?

(If a circle after a completed suicide the following notes might be helpful: After students have talked about these two questions, gently and kindly provide this overview of suicide:

- Suicide is not caused by a single event such as fighting with parents, or a bad grade, or bullying, or the breakup of a relationship.
- In most cases, suicide is caused by mental health disorders like depression or substance abuse

problems. Mental health disorders affect the way people feel and prevent them from thinking clearly and rationally. Having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of.

- There are effective ways to help people who have mental health disorders or substance abuse problems. Suicide is never the answer.)

**Round Two:** Now, let's focus on talking about the feelings we have after the event\_\_\_\_\_, and figure out the best way to manage them.

How are you feeling about what happened? Where do you feel those feelings in your body?

**Round Three:** It is ok to feel angry. It is ok to feel sad, or numb. These feelings are normal, and it doesn't mean that you didn't care about \_\_\_\_\_. You can be angry at someone's behavior and still care deeply about that person. At this school the adults are always here to help you through any problem, no matter what. If I am not sure what to do to help you, I can go with you to find someone who can.

Who are the people you would go to if you or a friend were feeling worried, depressed or wanted to hurt someone or yourself? Who can you talk to outside of school?

**Round Four:** Who can you talk to in this school?

**Round Five:** We are all unique. We all have different feelings—some people may be very affected by a challenging or intense event, others may feel less concerned. I want you to think about what you can do to help me and to help each other as we go forward.

What are some ideas you have on how can you be a friend or peacemaker to other students and adults in this classroom or school?

**Round Six:** We have so many ideas to choose from. We know that our bodies feel better if we do something kind for someone, even a little thing, like a smile. What is one thing you will do to show kindness to someone today or tomorrow? You can all pick the same idea!

**Final Round:** Give me one word: how was this circle for you today? You can all have the same word!

**Closing:** Remember small acts of meanness could trigger sadness or more meanness in others. But small acts of kindness and peacemaking have the power to create peace. This is the time to practice acts of respect and kindness. Help each other out. Solve any conflicts or disagreements peacefully. Talk to me or other adults if you have further questions or concerns.

And be kind to yourself. Here is a poem for you today, from a poet named Rumi:

Keep knocking, and the joy inside

Will eventually open a window

And look to see who's there.

Thank you for participating in circle, whether you did it out loud or in your head.

***Adapted from***

[Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools | SAMHSA Publications and Digital Products](#) Developed through a contract with the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors in collaboration with Education Development Center.

[Circle Forward Revised Edition 2020 - Living Justice Press](#), by Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015.

For further resources, contact [MDE School Climate Center](#), 651-582-8433.