

Do you know what to do when you learn that one of your students has experienced the loss of a loved one?

Students who have experienced the death of a family member or friend—bereaved students—may share this information with a faculty member but we might not be sure how to respond or what to do next.

Definitions

A number of terms are important when discussing loss.

- **Bereavement** – the loss of a loved one by death.
- **Grief and grieving** – the emotional reaction to the loss; often results in deep physiological changes. Once a fairly public process, grieving has become a more private, intimate experience.
- **Mourning** – the expressive behaviors that arise from one’s culture. Examples include sitting Shiva, wearing clothing in a specific color, burial preparation customs, and funeral rites.

Importance

The death of a family member or friend among college students is more common than is generally recognized (Balk, 2008). Anecdotal evidence, clinical observation, and several empirical studies indicate that “at any given time, 22 to 30 percent of college undergraduates are in the first twelve months of grieving the death of a family member or friend” (Balk, 2008, p. 5). For a college campus of 9,100 students, 2,000 to 3,700 are bereaved at any given time.

LaGrand (1985) called college students “the forgotten grievers” (p. 15) because our society views young people as being full of life and unlikely to experience the death of another person. He pointed out that, in fact, the losses experienced by college students may be of a greater intensity because students are in the midst of forming their identities. “The impact of death [on college students] is multiplied in effect because a student confronts not only the death of a loved one but the shattering of his or her sense of reality” (p. 16).

The Grieving Process and Response to Loss

Although not every bereaved person grieves (Aiken, 2001), an understanding of the grief process is useful to understanding bereavement. Kübler-Ross (1969) proposed five stages related to death and dying including denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. While many use this model to explain the grief experienced by loved ones and survivors, Kübler-Ross actually based her model on interviews conducted with dying individuals.

Alternatively, Doyle (1980) and Schultz (1978) proposed models that include stages of “shock, protest, anger, and disbelief” (Doyle, 1980, p. 13); confronting daily life without the deceased; and adaptation. Bonanno (2009) suggested that grieving is a pendulum-like experience, swinging between sadness and happiness, resulting eventually in equilibrium. He suggested that some individuals are more resilient and have less extreme or shorter grief experiences.

Impact of Grief

College students may find themselves in unfamiliar territory that includes funeral arrangements, medical bills, finances, and legal matters. They may also be a source of emotional support for surviving family members. In particular, students may find that their financial and emotional resources have been drastically altered or they may find themselves without a permanent home following the death of one or both parents.

Grieving may also have a direct, physical impact on the bereaved. Individuals who experience reactions that impact sleeping and eating (e.g., insomnia, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite) are especially susceptible to academic difficulty because their ability to function is impaired. Grieving may further aggravate or exacerbate college lifestyles that are often less than ideal, compounding problems with good nutrition, exercise, sleeping, studying, and relaxation.

The Special Circumstances of College Students

- Are often perceived as too young to experience the loss a loved one.
- Students may hesitate to broach the topics of death and bereavement for fear of addressing religion (a sometimes taboo subject) and the inexperience of peers with death and grief.
- College students may lack support because they may be living away from family, may not have a home, their friends may be unsure of how to help or be unable to help, and there are few obvious services available on college campuses
- College students are typically working through several cognitive and psychosocial issues simultaneously and the addition of bereavement may be more than they can adequately handle.

References

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The Faculty Role

- Be sensitive to the difficulty involved in sharing information with you about the death of a loved one. Explaining an absence, a change in academic performance, different levels or types of participation in class, requests for extensions or incompletes are all areas where the bereaved student must disclose information that may be both deeply personal and emotionally fraught.
- Remember that genetic family lineage does not necessarily indicate the strength of the relationship and the degree of loss experienced by the student. For some students the death of a peer or a long-term friend of the family may be more traumatic than the loss of a family member.
- Be flexible with students who have experienced loss, keeping in mind that their grieving process may last a few weeks to a year or more.
- Be attentive to students who have experienced loss and recognize that this may impact their attendance, participation levels, quality of work, and other areas. Each student will experience—and express—grief differently.
- Be open to listening to the student. Your open ears may be exactly what the student needs.
- Consider sharing your own experiences with loss and grief. Your perspectives and “lessons learned” may be instrumental to the student.
- Know your limitations and be willing to express them to the student. Students do not expect faculty members to be counselors and are likely to respect any boundaries you draw, especially when you offer alternative resources.
- Know how to refer a student for counseling and where ([Center for Counseling and Human Development](http://www.apscuf.org/universities/bloomsburg/), 240 Warren Student Services Center, 570-389-4255)