

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

Managing Bereavement and Loss as a Part of School and Higher ed Emergency Preparedness Planning

Between July and August 2019, the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Safe and Supportive Schools (OSSS) and its REMS TA Center hosted a series of [#REMSChatWithanExpert](#) Web chats with subject matter experts on key topics in school and higher ed emergency preparedness planning. The focus of our closing chat in the series with *Ailleth Tom Torrico, a REMS TA Center trainer and expert on the topic of mental health evaluation, crisis counseling & intervention services, school mental health, and trauma-informed care*, was on managing bereavement and loss.

No matter the threat or hazard types a school or whole school community may face, this is an important topic for education agencies and their community partners to consider as they work during [National Preparedness Month](#), back-to-school season, and around the year to create and update emergency operations plans (EOPs). As we memorialize the [September 11th National Day of Service and Remembrance](#) today and consider all survivors coping with bereavement and loss on a daily basis, ED's OSSS and REMS TA Center encourage you to read and share this recap of our conversation on the topic with Ms. Torrico.

Why should schools plan for bereavement and loss?

Every day throughout the nation, children come to school impacted by bereavement and loss in their lives. Schools play a crucial role in ensuring their social emotional well-being, recovery, and healing in the midst of such critical incidents.

Why should bereavement and loss be incorporated into the school EOP?

Bereavement and loss should be incorporated in the [five National Preparedness System mission areas](#) of a school's EOP—[Prevention](#), [Protection](#), [Mitigation](#), [Response](#), and [Recovery](#)—because we know these issues can be present before, during and after a critical incident, thus contributing to the possibility that students and staff may experience complex trauma.

An individual's reaction to an incident is dependent upon previous experiences, as well as their proximity to the current event, their coping skills, and ability to access resources and support. An incident, in and of itself, is not traumatic. It becomes traumatic when it exceeds an individual's capacity to cope.

Therefore, incorporating bereavement and loss into a school or higher ed EOP ensures there is plan in place to offer community and self-efficacy. (Access a [specialized training package](#) and [online course](#) from the REMS TA Center on this topic.) In accordance with the five mission areas, planning for the possibility of addressing bereavement and loss can help prevent and protect students from further harm, if they did not receive the proper support. Using brief supportive strategies such as [Psychological First Aid](#) can help mitigate the impact death and loss has on an individual. Furthermore, a trauma-informed response can aid in recovery and healing, not only of the students, but the entire school community. (Check out the REMS TA Center Webinar on [Trauma-Informed Care for Schools Before, During, and After Possible Emergency Events](#).)

Why should partnerships with community-based agencies be established prior to a tragedy?

The best time to [establish partnerships with community-based agencies](#) is before a crisis event, not during one. Collaborative partnerships are based on understanding, connections, and trust. School community partners and students need to feel reassured that in a time of need, aid and support will be rendered. These relationships need to be nurtured so that there is an understanding of roles, services,

and expectations. Education agencies and their partners have to know who to call to get the help they need.

How does grief negatively impact students?

Grief can impact students in a variety of ways—physically, emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively, interpersonally, and spiritually. Grief and loss can cause changes to an individual's appetite or sleep, extreme sadness or anger, changes in routine, forgetfulness, isolation, or loss of purpose. It is important to remember that these are normal grief responses. Having the ability and opportunity to process this by talking to someone and knowing there is a support system is what will help through the healing process.

Monitor these common reactions; with the right amount of support and a circle of care for the student, they can bounce back. Over time, if these grief responses persist and impact an individual's ability to do school work, connect with others, and take care of their basic needs, then perhaps it is time to ask for resources and seek professional support. Adults in schools play a pivotal role in monitoring and supporting student's recovery and healing; consider how that role can impact their personal mental health. The REMS TA Center offers a [Resilience Strategies for Educators live training by request](#) that can support K-12 agencies with this topic.

Why is important for members of the planning team to have specialized skills and knowledge in the field of bereavement and loss?

It is important for schools to have teams in place, such as crisis response and counseling teams that are trained to support students during critical incidents. Understanding normal grief responses, including the different ways children and adolescents grieve, what to say, and what not to say, is crucial for providing the appropriate support.

What preventative measures can schools take before a tragedy and after a tragedy?

There are various ways a school can prepare and plan for response, in the event of an emergency or crisis situations, schools can establish crisis teams and protocols for responding to critical incidents. For example, in the event of the death of a student, there should be protocols in place for how that information is relayed to staff and students, including obtaining the consent of family members. ED's OSSS also recommends that schools have a list of school and school district staff they can turn to in times of crisis, to provide crisis counseling and support to impacted students and staff. Many school districts work with their neighboring school districts in advance so that they are ready to provide one another support if needed.

After a tragedy, it is also important to be able to identify students and staff that have been most impacted by the incident, including those who witnessed the event or who knew the student well. They may need some extra support in the long-term, that includes regular check-ins, or even linkages to community-based services. Keep in mind that sometimes in the wake of a tragedy, some students may be impacted by witnessing the grief and mourning of those around them, even if they were not in close proximity to the event or the deceased. They may be triggered by their own previous losses and may also require additional support.

Why should school staff be aware of and sensitive to cultural and religious perspectives on death?

It is important to be aware that there are cultural and religious variations in the way individuals deal with death, including how they explain death to children and what their beliefs are about life and death. Individuals will feel most supported when they feel listened to, without judgement and without trying to impose one's own cultural or spiritual beliefs onto the grieving person. Utilizing active listening skills, if a grieving person mentions culture or religion, it is better to ask questions with curiosity, rather than proceed with a false understanding. For example, *you mentioned hearing noises in your home after your father died and you believe he is the one making the sounds. Tell me more about that.* It is also important to understand that even if there is a group of individuals who identify themselves as being from the same culture or religion, their perspectives on death may still vary. Additionally, it is important to recognize that tragedy and death can also lead individuals to lose their sense of purpose and meaning in life and lose faith in what they define as their higher power. This is a normal grief reaction that can be explored, especially if this shift in belief systems and purpose is causing an individual distress.

How is PFA-S and the PFA-LPC model helpful after a tragedy?

Psychological First Aid for Schools and [Psychological First Aid-Listen Protect Connect](#) are brief supportive actions that can be utilized to support individuals in the aftermath of a tragedy. Similar to First Aid or CPR, where you do not have to be a medical professional to administer aid, with PFA, you do not have to be a mental health professional to render aid to an individual. Utilizing the five components of PFA—Listen Protect Connect Model and Teach—allows you to provide social-emotional support to an individual in crisis to help them return to their baseline functioning as soon as practically possible, as well as to reduce the negative effects of experiencing tragedy or traumatic grief.

How should an education agency's [Communications and Warnings](#) annex be activated before and after a tragedy?

Following tragedies, education agencies need to be sensitive to the victims and take steps to not prolong experiences of trauma, increase stress, and/or unintentionally prompt personal memories that could result in a re-enactment of the trauma. Furthermore, we need to be respectful of the students' wishes and those of their families and caregivers. For example, it is not uncommon that families of a student who has died of suicide would not want the cause of death to be discussed or shared publicly. Conversely, school safety personnel might see it as an opportunity to have meaningful discussion aimed at prevention. This is an incredibly sensitive topic that should be handled in collaboration with legal counsel.

How should media access to the school be managed after a tragedy?

In the PFA-LPC model, one of the strategies identified to support students is the "Protect" strategy. Students come to school for structure, stability, and consistency. Allowing media on campus can alter the routine of a school and may compromise the safety they feel at school. Find out who the identified Public Information Officer is in within your district or school and refer media to those individuals. Learn more about school-level policies specific to media access on campus. Consider whether and how to have conversations with staff and students about the possibility that media might be outside the school and what they can say if they do not feel comfortable being on camera. Lastly, it is important for all school staff to be aware of school and/or school district policies specific to [sharing information](#) with the media to ensure that messages shared are factual and protect the identity of students and staff.

Are you on Twitter? Follow [@remstacenter](#) throughout September to access details on virtual events we'll be hosting with key partners, including a September 20 [Webinar on the topic of Managing Memorials and Anniversaries](#) with Safe & Sound Schools and the Koshka Foundation and a September 23 Web chat with the Administration for Children and Families on family engagement and youth preparedness. Not on Twitter? Join our mailing list by emailing info@remstacenter.org.



If you have questions or need additional assistance, please contact the REMS TA Center at (855) 781-REMS (7367) or info@remstacenter.org.

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