



## How educators can support students coping with COVID-19-related grief

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### Introduction

As an educator, you will encounter grief in the classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing the volume and complexity of grief affecting students. Whether it is an individual death impacting one student or the shift in our overall sense of safety since COVID-19 began, grief is everywhere. Beyond the individual experience, the world is in a collective state of grief. That sense of loss will be impacting your school and community.

Creating open conversations about death and grief in the classroom or other school settings will help students to feel more comfortable with what they are feeling and talking with you about it. By knowing that it is a space where they can explore the big thoughts and feelings that come along with these experiences, students will better be able to cope with the individual and collective grief they may experience.

### Talking about death and grief in the classroom

You are uniquely positioned to engage students in conversations about grief, death and how they are impacted by these experiences. There is an opportunity for you to support your students in developing the language and coping skills to discuss and live with their grief and other tough experiences in life.

Labelling the common emotions and thoughts associated with grief will normalize this experience and give students the language to continue the conversation. Here are some definitions to support conversations:

*"Death"* occurs when the body stops working and will never work again. When the body stops working, the person can no longer feel hunger, pain or fear.

*"Grief"* is the experience of all of the thoughts and feelings we have when a tough change happens.

### Name the collective grief experience

Take time to acknowledge changes and losses that have occurred for your students to allow for more open conversation. The existence of COVID-19 has significantly impacted students' exposure to loss, death and grief. They have seen parents lose jobs, experienced isolation from people who are sick and dying and know of the growing numbers of deaths due to COVID-19. All of these changes have contributed to the sense of collective grief in the world and your classroom.

### Explore change

Introduce the concept of change to students and facilitate a conversation about how their lives have changed due to COVID-19. To incorporate the concept of grief into this conversation, talk about good and hard changes. Some of these changes may be:

- Physical distancing and wearing masks in public
- Changed work situations for parents (working from home, not working, increased risk at the workplace)
- Missed activities
- Isolation from friends and family

- Worry about friends and family who are at higher risk if they contract COVID-19
- Exposure to media coverage of COVID-19 (growing numbers of cases and deaths, images, stories, etc.)
- Shifting sense of safety when out in public

## **Change and grief**

When you talk about hard changes and losses, call it 'grief' (because that's what it is!). Grief is the full human experience (physical, emotional, social and psychological) of experiencing a loss.

### **Keep the grief conversation going**

We live with grief. Let students know that grief isn't something for which there is a beginning, middle and end. Our experience of grief is ever-changing and as such, let students know that they can continue to bring up thoughts and feelings about it. Invite questions, ongoing conversation and check-ins throughout the year.

## **Supporting students who have experienced a death (COVID-related or otherwise)**

For students who have experienced a death in the last six months (COVID-related or otherwise), their grief has likely happened in relative isolation. Public health restrictions have limited the travel, gathering and rituals that help people with their grief. This may have impacted how they and their families have been grieving. Students may not have had access to their peers and other members of their support network during this difficult time. Below are some strategies you can use to support students who have experienced a death during COVID-19.

### **Connect with the family**

If you know ahead of time that a student has experienced a death, contact the family. Take this time to understand how their cultural and faith-based practices impact the way they grieve and understand death. Explore with the family if they feel that COVID 19 created barriers to a healthy grieving process for their kids (not having a funeral, child feeling responsible, are examples).

### **Check-in one-on-one**

Let your student know that you are aware that they have experienced a death. Use the name of the person who died (if you know it) and invite them to share what they are comfortable sharing. Respect their choice not to talk about it.

### **Sharing with the class (if they want to)**

For some students, not having their classmates know about the death will make school a scary place to feel their grief. Check with them and if they want to share with the class or have you share with the class. If they ask you to share, confirm with the student what they do and don't want you to share. Let them share (or communicate for them) that they have experienced a loss. Help your student to determine how they might like their classmates to support them. If the student doesn't want to share any information about the death with their class, let them know that's okay too.

### **Let them know you're there**

Communicate that they can come to you with thoughts and questions or if things just feel extra hard one day. You don't have to know all the answers (it's okay to say 'I don't know'), but by giving them a space to explore these things, you are setting them up to understand better, cope with and integrate their grief.

## **Activities to facilitate conversation about death and grief in the classroom**

- Class Contract: [Activity #1 Class Contracts.pdf](#)
- Question Jar: [Activity #2 Covid Question Jar.pdf](#)
- Ask the Doctor Session: [Activity #3 Ask the Doctor.pdf](#)
- Before/After Game: [Activity #4 Before and After Game.pdf](#)
- Changes Ceremony: [Activity #5 Changes ceremony.pdf](#)

## **Additional resources**

[KidsGrief.ca](http://KidsGrief.ca) – free online learning modules developed by experts in grief to guide families in supporting a grieving child and used as a reference for healthcare providers and educators.

[MyGrief.ca](http://MyGrief.ca) - an award-winning series of learning modules that helps people to understand and work through grief.