MEMORIALS

GENERAL CONCEPTS

Any memorial activity is bittersweet. The memory of someone who is dear can be pleasant, yet, in his or her absence, painful. This is true regardless of how the death occurred. Immediate grief may be accompanied by countless questions and speculations about the events that resulted in death. Mourners need some way to make sense of the death, some cognitive comprehension that allows them to "file" this tragic event in their memory. Once the facts of the tragedy are accepted, the manner of death ceases to be the focus and the loss can be more fully addressed.

Mourning is bringing aspects of one's own grief to the public. It is sharing the burden of one's pain. Mourning can facilitate the grief process. It allows public recognition of the person's life and a sharing of feelings on a community level. In most communities, memorials are an important part of the mourning process. How an individual mourns is a personal choice that may be influenced by one's community as well as by his or her own beliefs and values. The interaction between the grieving individual person and the community is what finally determines what the mourning process will be.

The norms in the community will influence what will occur in any memorial activities on or off school grounds. Any planning of the memorial should attempt to involve the victim's family. There may also be cultural considerations (e.g., wearing specific colors, use of prayer or religious images, a celebratory versus a somber tribute). Any school or community activity should take into consideration how past losses were memorialized, since people have a natural tendency to compare memorials.

It is advisable for schools to adopt a memorial policy that is general enough to cover any loss including a suicide **before** a tragedy occurs. Any school memorial should take into consideration how past losses were handled. The policy may outline a process for memorial requests (e.g., whether requests must obtain board approval). There may also be a period of deliberation between when requests are made that provides administrators time for making appropriate decisions that are not emotionally charged or driven by urgency. It may be useful to remind staff in the school community of the memorial policy at the faculty meeting that takes place at the start of the postvention.

Schools may establish a memorial committee that includes a diverse representation from school administration, student services department, agency mental health professionals, funeral directors, faith-based leaders, parents and perhaps a student

leader. This allows for different points of view to be considered when reviewing memorial requests. The size of the committee may vary but ideally is under ten members.

School administrators or staff who are approached by individuals interested in a memorial may offer the following:

> "Thank you for your suggestion. Our memorial committee will be reviewing all requests. The school board will make the final decision. In the meantime, you may consider approaching other organizations and venues such as one of the churches or civic centers for more immediate options."

It may help to consider four concepts when considering memorial activities:

1) **Proportion:** The memorial should be in proportion to past activities and with consideration to the amount of time and involvement from the school and community at large. For example, a memorial park should be smaller than a playground; a yearbook memorial page should not visually detract from or overwhelm the adjacent pages describing normal activities.
2) **Expression:** Ideas for memorials are often influenced by current fads and trends (e.g., social media page for the deceased, hashtags). While memorial requests may incorporate unique means of expression, review all memorials for cultural sensitivity to the deceased, his or her family, and the community as a whole.
3) **Outlook:** Adopting a theme of looking to the future with a sense of hopefulness is an important element in any memorial service, writing, or activity.
4) **Family Wishes:** Honor the surviving family's wishes and preferences when possible.

Consider a similar manner of memorialization for all types of death. Tangible objects, although well-intended, are subject to decay, damage, vandalism and may interfere with future development. For example, a memorial garden may turn to weeds if no one is assigned to care for it in the long term, or it may become a parking lot as part of a future school building expansion project. A plaque may get lost in the archives of a school. A revered bench may become a canvas for graffiti. On the other hand, "living memorials," such as donations to charity, prevention organizations, or scholarships through a non-school sponsored entity such as a civic organization like the Rotary may be a more viable option.

Other points to consider with regard to memorials:

- Gently remind students that the school is not the only venue to pay tribute to a loved one. Although it is important to offer outlets for grieving students to meet with a professional at school, not all of the activities have to take place on school grounds. In fact, doing so may set a precedent that is not advisable or manageable in the future. It may also serve as a disturbing reminder for some students.
- It is important for schools to keep in mind that they are about educating **all** students in a safe and supportive environment. The school should be as "equal" in memorial activities for students that are well-liked as well as those who were not. Thus, some schools deter from having school-sponsored memorials on site.
- Depending on the circumstances of the death, especially if there were legal issues involved or implied criminality, there may be a great deal of conflict in the school and community which may impact memorial requests and activities.
- Schools should be sensitive to individual and small group needs, but such support does not have to involve a school-sponsored or school-wide event. By accessing other natural supports such as faith-based organizations, specialized support groups, and community-based organizations, schools are actually expanding and strengthening the individual's resiliency and support network.
- Remember, decisions regarding memorials do not have to occur immediately after a death. Emotions and opinions are often intense after a death. Allow time for reactions to dissipate and for the return of a regular school routine to ensure that tributes are reasonable and appropriate.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOLLOWING A SUICIDE

Although the research on contagion supports a relationship between media coverage of a suicide and an increase in suicidal behavior (Gould et al., 1990; Insel & Gould, 2008), there is no such empirical research supporting the relationship between memorials following a suicide. In spite of the lack of research investigating memorials and contagion, there is a historical collection of anecdotal data and consensus among many suicidologists, mental health professionals, professional associations, and suicide survivors that certain precautions be followed as best practice recommendations regarding memorials following a suicide (Gould et al., 2003).

Thus, the general memorial recommendations mentioned in the previous section still apply following a suicide, but there are additional considerations and suggestions:

- Focus on the person, **not** on the manner/method of death. Sensationalizing and glamorizing a suicidal death should be avoided.
- Encourage living memorials (e.g., scholarships, donations to support/treatment organizations, annual walks to raise money for charity).

- Discourage "open mic" tributes with large groups of students. There is little control over what is shared, and the message that is heard by vulnerable youth in attendance may be skewed.
- Avoid the following: writing or murals on public school walls, impromptu shrines made at the locker or desk of the victim, clothing with pictures of the deceased or "rest in peace" messages, and ongoing gatherings without an adult present.
- Monitor online memorials and guest books for any comments of concern such as, "I'll be joining you soon," or "I won't live without you."
- Consider posting messages of support containing national and local crisis numbers along with resources at school.

Memorials should adhere to national safe and effective messaging guidelines, which were previously described in the section above on "Communications with the Media." Key national resources include Safe and Effective Messaging for Suicide Prevention and After a Suicide: Recommendations for Religious Services and Other Public Memorial Observances.

STUDENT-INITIATED GATHERINGS/GROUPS AND MEMORIALS

Any student-initiated support groups at school must have adult supervision, even though students may resist adult supervision. While students may want to exclude adults, it is essential that they have the encouragement and presence of caring adults so they can discuss their feelings in a safe and supportive environment. Adults provide structure and limits to the meeting that may otherwise become harmful. The postvention procedures can delineate qualified staff members with good student rapport to sit in on student-initiated groups.

Students may feel the need to leave mementos (e.g., letter, poems, flowers, balloons, teddy bears) on or near the victim's desk or locker. It is important that students have a means to express their grief and remember their friend. However, the school must also consider the reactions that such visual reminders evoke. Visual reminders that begin to look like a shrine may be of particular concern if the death was a suicide because of the risk of contagion. Therefore, students can be encouraged to bring cards and other items they would like to share with the family to the main office or other supervised area. Remind students that any items left at a locker, desk, or other area will be carefully collected throughout the day and shared with the family. A member of the postvention team can review the materials for appropriateness before sharing them with the family.

Schools may engage community partners (e.g., faith-based organizations, law enforcement, mentoring groups) to assist in monitoring impromptu gatherings and

memorials off school grounds, noting that it is extremely helpful for those offering supervision to have prior training on supporting students with grief. Some adolescents are susceptible to using alcohol and other substances to self-medicate their stress and grief reactions. Memorial activities may provide an opportunity for school-community partnerships to offer support, enhance student safety, and intervene as needed.

YEARBOOK MEMORIALS

It is important to help students understand that the yearbook is a celebration of memories that will remain in their possession for many years to come. The yearbook represents a collection of many different memories, recollections, contributions, writings, and photographs. The proportion of the memorial to the entire yearbook is important to keep in balance. For example, the memorial should not overwhelm or dominate the entire senior class section of the book. To do this would be to deny many students and their families the joys that a yearbook offers.

The content and visual qualities of the memorial are important. There should be adequate space given to a photograph or two, but without reference to the details of the death. Avoid dramatic colors and designs, as they detract from the overall goal of a yearbook. Consider including a photograph of the deceased, even if the photograph is supplied by the family or from a previous school year. This may be less dramatic than a blank or darkened space.

Prior to designing any memorial in the yearbook, the yearbook staff, with their faculty advisor, may offer to meet with the family of the deceased to determine their wishes, preferences, concerns, and feelings about a memorial. This can be accomplished through a scheduled meeting at the family's home or at school. The yearbook staff may want to produce a separate memory book with pictures, anecdotes, stories, and poems about the deceased that could be presented to the victim's family. Creating such a project may relieve some of the tension regarding decisions about what is and is not included in the yearbook itself.

GRADUATION ACTIVITIES AFTER A DEATH

Commemorations at the end of the school year can be especially painful for the victim's loved ones. If a high school senior has died, contact the victim's family to determine whether they have any particular wishes that the school may be able to honor (e.g., having a family member come to the stage to gather the diploma at the beginning of the ceremony, making private arrangements with the family of the deceased to meet them at their home and present them with their child's diploma).

If the family chooses to receive the diploma in their home, the principal, superintendent, or other administrator from the school should go, accompanied by someone who knows the family. If there are any awards banquets or other ceremonies where the student would have been recognized, then the same idea is helpful. It is not recommended to leave an empty chair at the ceremony because the visual may elicit strong reactions from other students and other attendees.

At the actual graduation ceremony, a word of recognition about the tragedy may be helpful. If the school has reached out to the parents/family by visiting them and presenting the diploma, this can be shared. This acknowledgment may put other parents and students at ease and shows compassion. The superintendent or principal may want to mention a memorial fund or other memorial that the school has arranged or is planning.

Any tragedies that have occurred should be addressed at the beginning of the ceremony, so that the focus can remain on the celebration that is well-deserved by students and their families. Do not leave the victim's name off the list of graduates. It is not uncommon for students to mention the tragedies in their remarks. While many schools pre-approve student remarks, they may also have a staff member on standby so the microphone can be muted if comments become inappropriate.

The concepts outlined above also apply to situations in which a younger student has died. That student should still be recognized at any elementary or middle school graduation activities or be remembered at other commemorative activities, as appropriate.

ANNIVERSARY DATES

Grief feelings can resurface on or near the anniversary date of a tragic loss. It is helpful to keep in mind that the reactions associated with the anniversary are not limited to the exact date but rather a period of time, perhaps even the time of year. These feelings can reflect a normal "remembering" of the person or they may be of greater intensity. Some individuals may experience the anniversary as if the event was happening all over again, while others may not even acknowledge the day or display any reaction.

Some individuals may experience a postponed response called delayed grief reaction, which involves experiencing acute grief reactions at a later time, such as around the anniversary of the death rather than immediately following the death. There is also a possibility that some individuals may begin to experience complicated grief reactions after the six-month anniversary (Shear et al., 2005; Zistook & Shear, 2009). These reactions are marked by significant disruptions in sleep and daily routine and may

include an avoidance in activities associated with the deceased. As noted earlier, complicated grief often involves 1) disbelief that the individual has died and an inability to "move on," 2) bitterness and anger over the death, 3) intense emotional pain with prolonged yearning and longing for the deceased, and 4) preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased that at times are distressing in nature (Prigerson et al., 1999).

The postvention team, in consultation with mental health professionals, can meet to discuss the appropriateness of follow-up activities. At a minimum, these activities may involve checking in with previously screened students, their parents, and impacted staff to see how they are coping. As noted earlier in the section on "Preventing Contagion: Postvention Following Suicide," close friends and siblings exposed to a youth suicide are at an increased risk for PTSD and depression in the first month after the death, although the risk for PTSD from additional traumas may continue to increase (Brent et al., 1996). When possible, monitor students and staff even two years after the death, especially if the death was a suicide, to assess for any signs of complicated grief or other mental health concerns such as suicidal ideation and self-injurious behaviors (Swanson & Colman, 2013).

Faculty and staff, if reminded of the anniversary, can prepare to monitor and support students at that time. Adults are not immune to this. Depending upon their own personal history, various staff members may also re-experience the loss. The postvention team may consider a program on the anniversary date. Be aware that similar responses may occur on special occasions like the deceased's birthday. Other potentially difficult dates include the first holidays, games, recognition dinners, proms, and graduation without the deceased.