

SUPPORTING YOUTH IN GRIEF

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from any of the following:

- **The truth** about what has happened. If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity as is essential for your credibility.
- **The opportunity to talk about the event** as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Too, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.
- **Understanding that this event might be a "trigger"** which is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something frightening in their histories.
- **Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that**, if they come from a dysfunctional home, their abilities to cope with grief is likely diminished.
- **Being allowed to use the SafeRoom** even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on school work until they've had the opportunity to process some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the SafeRoom and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving process.
- **To find meaning in the event.**
- **Help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students about whether they've ever been to a funeral, what it was like, and what to expect with this one.
- **Continued structure in the schedule for the day.** It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school, where they can grieve with others. They can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule and showing up for all or many of their usual classes, because there is a sense of routine. Suspend the academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period, in others, all day.
- **Consistency in discipline, with flexibility.** Often at these times, students feel life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behavior is not within the usual realm of the classroom. Exceptions may be made with expectations of how much academic work gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of school life which do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure.

Students do **not** need for you to become an instant counselor. They **do** need for you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged. If your school is going through a tragedy or trauma, the first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions.

Encourage students to:

- **support each other** for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- **put extra energy into friendships.** Exchange phone numbers with each other.
- **take good care of themselves** by eating well and getting lots of rest..

