

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL STAFF
AND ADMINISTRATORS



For more information or to arrange for a consultation and/or visit, please contact

Moshe Borowski, A.C.S.W.,

Director of Crisis Intervention Services,

(212) 699-6646 or 1(877)CHAILIFE ext. 646
MBOROWSKI@CHAILIFELINE.ORG



Helping the child, the family and the community

151 W. 30TH STREET | NEW YORK CITY, NY 10001
212.465.1300 | 877.CHAILIFE

WWW.CHAILIFELINE.ORG

CHAI LIFELINE'S
DEPARTMENT OF CRISIS
INTERVENTION SERVICES

Helping schools face crisis or loss



Helping the child, the family and the community



School is much more than an academic venue for most children. The camaraderie and friendships, the intellectual and spiritual stimulation, the structure and support – all contribute to making school a unique experience. When this special environment is shattered by tragedy, everyone – from the youngest student to the most experienced teacher – will feel the effects.

When crisis strikes, it is the task of school staff and administrators to help their students cope with the situation. This may not be easy since they themselves are also trying to come to grips with what has happened. Therefore, it is vital

that school staff (including administrators, rebbim, teachers, nurses and guidance counselors) work together to understand and sensitively address the various issues and responses related to grief that may present themselves inside and outside the classroom.

The following guide is intended to provide basic information on how children and teens may respond to tragedy and loss. Chai Lifeline's department of crisis intervention is available to schools to offer concrete suggestions and on-site presentations. Please call 212 699-6646 for information and assistance.

A WORD ABOUT GRIEF

When tragedy occurs, everyone – students, parents and school staff – will be affected. The following points are important to keep in mind when dealing with grief in a school setting:

- There are no recipes or formulas for grieving.
- Many factors affect how a child grieves, including developmental stage, coping mechanisms, maturity, family dynamics, social supports, proximity to the actual death (if applicable) and relationship to the *niftar*.
- During private or group discussions, it is vital that children be given the choice to participate or opt out of the activity. Some children will welcome the opportunity to express their feelings. Pressuring children to talk can add to their feelings of victimization, loss of autonomy, helplessness, anxiety and stress.
- Ask children in advance whether they feel comfortable talking. Keep in mind that some will want to participate in a group discussion while others may feel more comfortable speaking one-on-one with a *rebbe*, teacher or guidance counselor.

Children's grief may cause them to question long-held spiritual beliefs. School staff should be prepared to respond sensitively and tactfully when any of the following reactions are noted:

- Anger at Hashem
- Anger at those who represent Hashem (principals, *rebbeim*, rabbis, teachers)
- Anger at institutions that represent religion (*yeshivas*, *shuls*, camps)
- Loss of meaning or purpose
- Feeling lost or abandoned by Hashem
- Questioning the religious practices done on behalf of the *niftar* (praying, reciting *Tehillim*, increased observance of mitzvos, giving *tzedaka* or Torah-learning)
- Questioning of (or withdrawal from) religious observances or beliefs
- Sudden or drastic increases in religious observance
- Superstitious beliefs and/or practices
- Anxiety-induced fear of Hashem

COMMON REACTIONS TO DEATH

Each student experiences death differently. While any of the following responses are to be expected, reactions that are so frequent, intense and/or longstanding that they interfere with a student's normal routines are cause for concern and may require additional intervention. Immediate action should be taken if a student is judged to be a danger to himself or herself, or to others.

PHYSICAL	ACADEMIC	BEHAVIORAL	EMOTIONAL
Headaches	Difficulty focusing or concentrating	Changes in sleeping/eating patterns	Sadness
Stomachaches	Difficulty making decisions	Isolation or withdrawal (from friends, teachers, activities)	Grief or regret
Gastro-intestinal disorders	Forgetfulness, memory lapses, confusion	Sudden crying	Shock or numbness
Chest pains/ breathing difficulties	Inattentiveness, daydreaming, fantasizing	Excessive talking or silence	Guilt
Fatigue or exhaustion	Declining or failing grades	Frequent visits to nurse	Fatigue
Muscle twitches	Sudden attempts at over-achievement, trying to be perfect	Outbursts in class	Depression
Dizziness, fainting	Obsessive or worrying thoughts about school work	Increased absences or reluctance to attend school	Helplessness
Chills, nausea or weakness	Excessive worrying about safety, either personal or other's	Clinging to teachers	Feeling lonely, lost or abandoned
Rapid heart rate/ elevated blood pressure		Regressive behaviors in class or at play	Feeling of emptiness
Profuse sweating		Hyperactive or hyper-vigilant	Feeling overwhelmed
Numbness		Shirking from physical contact	Anxiety or panic
Hives or rashes			Anger
Heightened sensitivity to sights, sounds, smells and touch			Fear or apprehension
			Insecurity
			Apathy
			Irritability
			Lack of affect

COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS ACCORDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

AGES 3-6

- Death is often viewed as sleeping.
- “Magical thinking” (“Mommy will be getting up soon and coming home.”) may occur.
- Repetition of questions like “When is the *niftar* coming back?”
- Acting and talking as if the *niftar* is still alive.
- Drawings and play activities may include re-enactments of what occurred.
- Regressive behaviors, i.e., thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, clinging, clutching dolls and wanting to sleep in the parents’ bed, may appear.

AGES 10 -12

- Exhibition of certain adult-like responses (anger and sadness).
- Insistence that they are unaffected by the death.
- Somatic responses (stomachaches, headaches).
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Mood swings.

AGES 7-9

- Curiosity and preoccupation with physical aspects of death (sights, smells, etc.).
- Repetition of questions or constant talk of death.
- Tendency to view death as a being or spirit (skeleton, ghost, angel of death, “bogeyman”).
- Feelings of guilt and anger at inability to prevent death.
- Brief, fleeting responses (may play after hearing of death, and then come back to hear more details).
- Regressive behaviors (thumb-sucking, clinging, bedwetting, etc.).

AGES 13- 18

- “Acting out” via risky or dangerous behavior.
- Withdrawal.
- Sadness and crying.
- Avoids sharing feelings with adults.
- Feels inner pressure to “act like an adult.”
- Questions the meaning and purpose in life.

Tips for Helping Students Deal with Grief

- Provide age-appropriate information in simple, basic and factual terms.
- Create a safe environment for students to discuss their feelings, but do not force or coerce them to talk.
- Answer questions calmly. Younger children may ask blunt questions while unaware that they might appear insensitive or inappropriate to adults.
- Be patient if the same questions are asked repeatedly.
- Be patient with children whose responses are fleeting or seemingly carefree. This is an age-appropriate reaction to stressful news that helps younger children cope with the tragedy.
- Distinguish the difference between physical death and spiritual life as simply as possible for children. This may be very comforting to them and provides an opportunity to explain a Jewish perspective of death.
- If children are leaving school to attend the *levaya*, *kevura* and/or *shiva*, prepare them by describing the rituals and reactions they can expect to see. Also, explain their role in the event(s). Do not assume they already know what will happen in such situations.
- Balance regular school routines while remaining reasonably flexible.
- Model appropriate emotions and responses for students. Expressing your sincere emotions can be healthy for all, but be careful not to come across as distraught or incapacitated.
- Encourage arts and crafts projects (for example, group condolence cards) that students can send to the bereaved family.
- Encourage children (especially teens and pre-teens) to engage in appropriate group memorials for the *niftar*. *Tzedaka* and Torah-learning campaigns can be quite meaningful for them and the bereaved family.
- Writing, poetry, collages and collecting photos or other mementos can provide expressive outlets and create an ongoing remembrance of the *niftar*.
- Focus children on inner strengths, relationships and activities that make them feel safe and secure.