

Navigating Student loss: A Campus Toolkit

Introduction

The tragic loss of a student is one of the most difficult experiences a university community can face. It impacts classmates, faculty, staff, and the broader campus in profound and often unexpected ways. As educators and mentors, we are not only tasked with guiding students academically, but also with supporting them through moments of deep grief and loss.

This **Student Loss Toolkit Guide** was created to provide clear guidance, compassionate language, and practical resources for navigating these challenging situations. Its purpose is to help faculty and staff respond with empathy, consistency, and care, while ensuring that students and the wider university community have access to the support they need.

Inside, you will find:

- Guidance on communicating news of a student's death.
- Suggested talking points for supporting grieving students.
- Information about counseling and crisis response resources.
- Protocols for memorials, vigils, and community gatherings.
- Recommendations for maintaining sensitivity and flexibility in the classroom.

While no toolkit can remove the pain of loss, this guide aims to help us come together in compassion supporting our students, honoring the memory of those we have lost, and fostering a community of care.

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Core Principles of Response

When responding to the death of a student, it is essential that our actions reflect empathy, clarity, and consistency while supporting the needs of both individuals and the broader campus community. The following principles guide our approach:

A. Acknowledge the Loss

- Recognize the impact of the death openly and sincerely.
- In high schools, this may take the form of assemblies or large group announcements; in universities, communication is often better suited to small-group discussions, classroom settings, or official email messages.
- The method of acknowledgment should balance timeliness with sensitivity to those most affected.

B. Transparent Communication

- Provide factual, age and audience appropriate information, avoiding speculation or unconfirmed details.
- High schools typically involve parents of students more directly in communication while universities should prioritize direct communication with their students. In both cases, communication should be conducted with respect to the bereaved family's wishes.
- Use consistent, official channels to reduce misinformation.

C. Respect for Grieving Styles

- Recognize that individuals grieve in different ways and at different paces.
- Offer a variety of opportunities for expression such as counseling sessions, peer support groups, written messages, vigils, or memorial gatherings without requiring participation.
- Normalize both private and community-centered grieving.

D. Avoid Glorification or Stigma

- Communicate about the loss in ways that honor the student's life without glamorizing the circumstances of their death.
- This is particularly important in cases of violence. Messages should avoid sensationalism, stigma, or language that may increase risk for vulnerable individuals.

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- Provide supportive resources alongside all communications to encourage help-seeking behavior such as easy access to counseling/mental health resources and crisis hotline information.

E. Structured Normalcy

- While acknowledging the grief, maintain a sense of routine and stability to help students and staff navigate the days ahead with clarity for continued grief support, resources, and needed contacts for assistance.
- Encourage flexibility in classrooms, workplaces, and campus life, while also signaling a gradual return to normal activities. ([Refer to Types of Accommodations on page 6](#))
- Balance compassion with the reassurance that the university remains a consistent supportive, stable environment.

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Immediate Actions for Administrators and Faculty

A. Activate Response Team

- **High School:** Principal, school counselor, district staff, and other designated crisis team members.
- **University:** Dean of Students, Campus Health Services, Public Relations, and other designated crisis team members.

B. Confirm Details

- Verify information with the family and relevant authorities before any public communication.
- Ensure accuracy to prevent misinformation.

C. Notify Key Staff

- Inform faculty, staff, and student support personnel.
- Provide talking points and guidance for supporting students.
- Maintain internal updates through official channels.

D. Contact Family

- Offer condolences and support.
- Confirm what information can be shared publicly or with the community.
- Respect the family's wishes regarding memorials or announcements.

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Communication Strategies and Resources

Effective, sensitive communication is critical following a student loss. Use this page to guide internal and external messaging while maintaining a compassionate and consistent tone.

A. Internal Communications

Purpose: Inform and prepare staff and students promptly and sensitively.

- **High School:** Schoolwide announcements or classroom-based discussions.
- **University:** Emails, class announcements, dorm or residence hall notifications.

B. Talking Points

Purpose: Equip faculty and staff with language to support students.

- Provide prepared talking points for teachers, professors, and student support staff.
- Ensure messaging is clear, compassionate, and age appropriate.

C. External Communications

Purpose: Share information with families, media, and the broader community.

- Coordinate all messaging with the family's preferences.
- Adjust communication based on the type of death: violent, accident, or mass casualty.
- Ensure consistency across all public statements.

D. Tone by Type of Death

- **Violent (to include suicide, homicide, legal force/intervention, unintentional firearm injuries, undetermined intent where violence is suspected) :**
Acknowledge the tragic loss respectfully, avoid graphic details; emphasize support and available resources.
- **Accident:** Acknowledge the tragic loss respectfully and highlight available support services.
- **Mass Casualty:** Focus on safety, counseling, and ongoing support for the community.

Quick Reference Tip:

Always verify facts before communicating, respect privacy, and tailor messages to the audience while prioritizing compassion and support.

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Academic & Attendance Accommodations

When a student experiences the loss of a peer or community member, academic flexibility and support are essential to help them cope while maintaining their educational progress.

Academic and attendance accommodations allow space for grieving and healing while helping students remain connected to their education

A. Types of Accommodations

- Allow excused absences for students directly affected by the loss including and not limited to permission to miss class without penalty.
- Provide flexibility with assignment deadlines, allowing extra time for exams or project submissions.
- Encourage faculty to communicate accommodations proactively and compassionately.

B. Coordination by Education Level

High School:

- Coordinate with parents/guardians to ensure students receive support and necessary adjustment communicating with teachers, counselors, and administrators.
- Schools may adjust workloads, arrange make-up opportunities, or create short-term academic support plans.

University:

- Encourage students to self-advocate for academic accommodations while providing institutional support through academic advisors, student affairs, or counseling services.
- Institutions often provide formal processes for accommodations through disability services, student support services, or the dean of students' office.
- Options may include reduced course loads, forgiving incompletes, or approved leaves of absence when needed.

C. Close Connections & Additional Support

- Students who have a particularly close relationship with the deceased may require additional resources, such as counseling, mentoring, or temporary leave of absence.
- Encourage faculty and staff to identify students who may need extra support and refer them to appropriate services.

Quick Reference Tips:

Communicate accommodations clearly and empathetically.

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Balance academic expectations with sensitivity to grief.

Maintain confidentiality while ensuring students know available support options

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Memorialization and Grief Expression

Following the death of a student it is important to provide students, staff, and families with safe, structured, and developmentally appropriate opportunities to express grief, honor the life of the student, and support the healing process while maintaining a stable and supportive school environment.

A. Guiding Principles

- Memorialization and grief expression should be student-centered, voluntary, and inclusive of diverse cultural, spiritual, and personal beliefs.
- Schools should strive to honor the student's life without unintentionally romanticizing or sensationalizing the loss.
- All activities and expressions should be respectful and guided by faculty, administrators, or other adult leader(s). (See Section B below for examples of memorial activities)
- The emotional well-being and safety of students and staff should remain the primary focus.

B. Immediate Grief Expression Opportunities

- In the days immediately following a loss, provide structured opportunities for students and staff to process emotions.
- Establish a designated space for reflection and support (e.g., counseling office or quiet room) staffed by counselors or trained personnel
- Offer guided activities such as journaling, letter writing, or message boards
- Provide creative outlets (art, drawing, memory boards) to support nonverbal expression of grief
- Facilitate small group conversations led by counselors or trusted staff
- Ensure clear communication about how to access individual counseling and support

C. Short-Term Memorialization

- Temporary memorials can provide comfort while maintaining appropriate boundaries.
- Designate a specific, supervised location for memorial items (e.g., flowers, notes, photos)
- Establish and communicate a clear timeframe for the memorial (typically several days to one week)
- Inform students and staff how items will be handled after the designated period (e.g., returned to family, respectfully removed)
- Monitor the space to ensure all contributions remain appropriate and supportive

D. Long-Term Memorial Considerations

- Permanent memorials should be approached thoughtfully and in alignment with school or district policies:
- Avoid creating permanent memorials without careful review and administrative approval
- Consider meaningful alternatives that emphasize legacy and positive impact, such as:
 - Scholarships or charitable initiatives
 - Service projects or days of remembrance
 - Awareness or kindness campaigns
- Collaborate with the student's family when appropriate
- Ensure decisions are equitable and consistent across all situations involving student loss

E. Participation in Memorial or Funeral Services

- Share service information with the school community in coordination with the family and in accordance with their wishes
- Provide guidance regarding student attendance, supervision, and transportation
- Offer on-campus support options for students who do not attend services
- Prepare students for what to expect to help them navigate emotional responses

F. Cultural and Individual Considerations

- Recognize and respect that grief is expressed differently across cultures, religions, and individual experiences
- Avoid assumptions about how individuals should grieve or participate
- Provide multiple pathways for expression to meet a range of emotional needs
- Be attentive to those who may be more deeply impacted, including close friends, classmates, teammates, and staff such as professors who may have taught the student or adult leaders of organizations within which the student was involved

Student Loss Response Toolkit:

Grief Support Services and Long-Term Healing and Follow Up

Providing supportive services following student loss is important. Continue to communicate available resources to ensure students, staff, and families receive ongoing, developmentally appropriate support following a student loss, recognizing that grief evolves over time and requires continued care, attention, and access to resources.

A. Immediate Support

In the immediate aftermath of a loss, prioritize access to trained professionals who can respond to acute emotional needs.

- Provide access to crisis counselors and trauma-informed professionals on campus
- Establish safe, supervised spaces where students and staff can process emotions
- Offer individual and small-group support sessions to address immediate reactions
- Ensure staff are equipped with guidance on recognizing and responding to acute grief responses

B. Ongoing Support

As the school community begins to move beyond the initial crisis phase, continue offering structured and accessible support.

- Maintain access to school-based or community grief counselors
- Offer small group support or peer-based grief groups for students who may benefit from shared experiences
- Provide psychoeducation on grief, helping students and staff understand common grief responses, coping strategies, and emotional fluctuations
- Share resources with families to support grief conversations and emotional care at home
- Encourage staff to integrate flexibility and understanding into academic expectations when appropriate

C. Long-Term Care and Referrals

Recognizing that some individuals may require more specialized or extended support.

- Provide individualized referrals to mental health professionals, therapists, or community organizations as needed

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- Collaborate with families and/or individual students to ensure continuity of care beyond the school setting when necessary
- Support access to specialized services for students experiencing trauma, anxiety, depression, or complicated grief
- Maintain a resource list of trusted providers and community supports

D. Ongoing Monitoring and Support

Grief does not follow a predictable timeline; continued awareness and care are essential.

- Continue to provide visible and accessible support in the weeks and months following the loss
- Be attentive to signs of prolonged or complicated grief, including withdrawal, significant behavior changes, academic decline, or persistent distress
- Refer students and staff to appropriate services when additional support is needed
- Reinforce consistently that grief is not linear, and that it is normal for emotions to resurface over time
- Encourage ongoing check-ins by counselors, teachers, and administrators with those most impacted

E. Communication with the School Community

Clear, consistent communication helps create a supportive and unified environment.

- Provide timely and sensitive updates to students, staff, and families as appropriate
- Clearly communicate expectations and guidelines for memorialization activities and support services
- Promote a consistent, respectful approach to grief across the school community
- Share information regularly about available mental health resources and how to access them

F. Continued Acknowledgement and Remembrance

Opportunities to remember and honor the student can support ongoing healing.

- Provide updates regarding memorial efforts or initiatives, when appropriate and in alignment with school guidelines
- Acknowledge significant dates (such as anniversaries) in a thoughtful and optional manner, based on the preferences of the family and school community
- Offer appropriate opportunities for reflection or acts of remembrance, ensuring participation is always voluntary
- Be mindful that anniversaries and milestones may re-trigger grief, and proactively make support available during these times

Further Supporting Resources and Reference Guides:

See Appendix A:

Appendix B

Appendix C