

EDUCATORS: GRIEF & LOSS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

30 Days of Mental Health

Strengthening the capacity of educators and families to meet children's wellbeing and mental health needs!

**Supporting Students
Through Feelings of
Grief and Loss**

30DaysOfMentalHealth.org



Grief & Loss During the Holidays

INTRODUCTION [use developmentally appropriate language when discussing with students]

This lesson is not intended to be completed in one class period, rather it should be used to prepare students for a broad range of holidays where the grief and loss may be particularly strong.

Before engaging in sensitive conversations with students, consider ways to foster trust and build community. When you begin with building trust, difficult conversations become possible because it encourages greater openness amongst the community. Building a trusting community may take time, so stay committed to the journey and present students with as many opportunities as possible to foster relationship-building and trust. Start with low-stakes activities such as a ball toss where students share goals about their future or share simple facts about their family, culture, or values. Activities like these help students get to know one another better and facilitate bonding.

As you engage in this lesson on grief and loss, follow your students' lead and invite them to opt into as little or as much of the lesson as they desire.



The holiday season can make the pain and sadness associated with grief and loss grow stronger. Traditionally, the holidays involve spending time with family members or observing communal religious practices. All over the media, we see family members coming together, and friends may ask "where are you going, and who will you spend time with?" This means that while the holidays may produce warm feelings and memories for most of us, to a grieving person, the holidays can include days of intense sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and despair.

Begin this lesson with your students by asking what they know about grief and loss. You can start the conversation with the following questions:

- How does someone usually feel after they lose someone they are close to or that they love?
 - How do these emotions usually show up in our bodies?
- What does the words grief and loss mean to you?
- Why might experiencing grief and loss be especially hard during the holiday season?

Have students type their answers into a collective google doc and then use this [Word Cloud Generator](#) to help them collectively visualize their answers to each question.

Next, share the definition of grief with students and ask if they have anything to add to the definition:

Grief is a natural and healthy emotional response to losing people we love, having to move from the places we call home, and no longer having things that we care about.



Although there are universal stages of grief that most people experience, the intensity, duration, and expressions are as unique to each person as is the healing process. Depending on the nature of the loss, it can be a powerful and overwhelming process that is accompanied by strong feelings, misunderstood behaviors, and major disruptions to a person's ability to manage daily life tasks.

Consider watching and discussing [this video](#) with students and then reviewing the stages of grief shown on the next page.

When you create an emotionally safe and supportive environment during periods of bereavement, you are building students' capacity to find the inner strength necessary for healing.

Your Role as an Educator



While you are not expected to become students' counselors, your goal is to normalize the fact that short-term and long-term grief is a natural part of experiencing loss. You should not ask or expect that student(s) will want to discuss the loss or the details of their grieving process with you or their classmates. Allowing a child time to grieve means accepting their emotional and behavioral expressions of grief, validating the process by listening and offering nonjudgmental compassion.

Remember to monitor your level of compassion fatigue as you support others. Meeting the emotional and academic needs of children who are hurting is emotional labor. You may want to shield them from the pain and hurt or perhaps it triggers your own personal experiences of grief and loss. You may feel unprepared or too emotional to respond in helpful ways despite a sincere desire to be present and to help. These are all normal feelings and reactions. **It is okay, not to be okay!**

While it is important that services be provided to students in need, it is not the responsibility of any one staff member. Seek assistance from others when you notice that you have reached your emotional capacity. Please collaborate with colleagues and consistently monitor your own mental health when offering support.

Recognizing the Signs of Healthy and Unhealthy Grief Responses in Students

It is also important for you to know when students are exhibiting adaptive grief responses vs less adaptive responses. This will enable you to know when to reach out to the school social worker and other clinical staff for assistance.

Healthy (adaptive) grief responses	Unhealthy (less adaptive) grief responses
Able to experience and then move beyond the initial intense emotional pain associated with losing a loved one	Avoids and distances self from experiencing the initial intense emotional pain associated with losing a loved one
Older children are able to understand the permanency of death. Very young children may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back and need to be reminded that the person is dead and is not able to return	Prolonged disbelief that the person who has passed on is no longer living and with them, regardless of age
Able to slowly commit themselves to new relationships, even though the person who died cannot be replaced	Challenges forming new interpersonal relationships.
Begins to move ahead in a healthy developmental trajectory instead of getting stuck at a certain developmental level or regressing to a previous level	Noticeable regression in behaviors, particularly in marked developmental milestones such as toileting behaviors, social skills, basic hygienic practices, etc.

5 STAGES OF GRIEF



This article by Jodi Clarke provides a helpful [summary of the stages of grief](#).

Recognizing Childhood Traumatic Grief in School Settings



Most children will display adaptive grieving characteristics a few weeks or months after the loss. However, it is critical to understand that adaptive grieving varies from person to person. Thus, we should not expect children to follow a rigid time frame for grieving.

Most students who are experiencing difficulty coping with the loss in their life will exhibit behavior challenges, which are nonverbal ways of asking for help. Below are some key symptoms associated with traumatic grief and ways this may show up in the classroom.

RE-EXPERIENCING: The student has frightening or otherwise distressing memories. These memories include thoughts or dreams of the person, how the person died, and with younger children, scary thoughts or dreams that may seem unrelated to the death. These memories and fears may interfere with the child's ability or desire to remember happy times with the deceased person. At other times the student may seem perfectly normal. The student may become very angry, upset, or physically ill when faced with trauma, loss, or change reminders.

- **At school this may look like** daydreaming, not paying attention, or seeming distracted due to having intrusive thoughts about the death or the deceased person.

AVOIDANCE: The student attempts to avoid memories of the deceased person, even happy memories, because these may turn into thoughts about the person's death. This may also lead to the student not wanting to celebrate holidays that remind them of the person (e.g., not wanting to visit the cemetery, not wanting the family to reminisce about the person, and becoming angry when other family members or peers derive comfort or happiness from such activities).

- **At school this may look like** withdrawing from activities (e.g. not wanting to engage in holiday, birthday or other celebratory activities, not wanting to talk about certain topics), getting angry or changing the subject when certain subjects are raised. These topics may have little apparent relationship to the deceased or the way the person died and it may take some detective work on the teacher's part to make a connection.

HYPERAROUSAL: The student may have difficulty sleeping, increased anger, physical symptoms (e.g., headache, stomachache) or increased jumpiness such as in response to loud noises. The student may be on increased alert and watch for the health and safety of other loved ones immediately following the loss. Additionally, as a result of reminders or thoughts related to the loss, the student may experience difficulty sleeping along with other challenges. These symptoms may be interspersed with periods of the student seeming perfectly fine.

- **At school this may look like** frequent headaches, stomachaches, asking to go to the nurse's office, decreased ability to concentrate or pay attention, or angry outbursts.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DYSREGULATION: The student may have trouble modulating feelings and/or behaviors, especially when reminded of the death or the person who died. For example, children may have new fears or more difficulty with anger, be more irritable, moody, bored, inattentive, or seem to 'go from zero to sixty' in terms of escalating emotional and behavioral outbursts.

- **At school this may look like** angry outbursts without a known trigger, discussions about wanting to die themselves, self-blame or guilt associated with the loss (e.g., 'I should have known my mother would get killed' or 'I should have warned my brother not to walk home from school that way'), or even a sense of lost identity or change in personality.



This might be a good time in the lesson to check-in with your students to determine where they are emotional after discussing content that can be difficult, particularly for those who recently experienced a loss. Never assume that your students are OK just because they are not openly showing their emotional response. Remember most people have been socialized to act as if everything is OK even when it isn't.

Check-in Methods:

- Formal method: Use a needs assessment, which assesses students' feelings and needs in the moment, which would allow you to respond immediately and effectively. You can send it out to the class as an online check-in survey.
 - Consider the following questions:
 - How are you feeling at this moment?
 - a) confused; b) numb; c) relaxed d) upset; e) sad; f) none of these
 - How difficult was it to sit and talk through this discussion?
 - a) very difficult; b) moderately difficult; c) neither difficult or easy
 - What do you need right now?
 - a) time alone; b) a quick break from the classroom to take a walk; c) to take a few deep breaths; d) support from a supportive/trusted person; e) other- please specify
- Informal method: Place an index card and emoji stickers on each student's desk and ask them to select the sticker that best describes their emotion at the moment and place it on the index card. This activity allows students to provide both anonymous and non-verbal feedback, which may help students who struggle with effectively communicating their emotions.

Considerations for Supporting Teenagers Coping with Grief and Loss

Healthy or adaptive grief can be particularly challenging for teens because they often have an adult understanding of death without adult coping skills. Additionally, after the loss of a family member, many teens are told that they should assume the role of "taking care of the family," which adds an additional layer of stress.

Signs that a teen may need extra help include:

- Signs or symptoms of chronic depression or extended periods of sadness, sleeping difficulties, restlessness and low self-esteem
- Academic failure or indifference toward school-related activities
- Deterioration of relationships with family and friends
- An increase in risk-taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation
- Asserting their strength or maturity by denying emotional pain or suffering
- When you notice these signs in your teen students, it can be helpful to explore with school mental health staff members the availability of community support groups that the teen can join in addition to individual brief therapy or church groups.

Alongside these resources, you can also offer students support through being a caring adult in their life by simply being present and validating their reactions to the loss. Foster conversations that assure them that the pain they are experiencing will not last forever and that healing is individualized, which means that they can experience various emotions as long as they need. Being present to sit with them in their discomfort and showing that you are available to answer questions or offer care is what teens need from their educators in their journey to healing.



How Loss Associated with the Pandemic has Impacted Holiday Celebrations

Many individuals experienced grief and the loss of loved ones due to the pandemic. As we approach the holiday season, it is normal to be anxious about the best ways to support young people coping with such loss. The best first step is to start discussing the holidays with them and share ways in which things may look or feel different.

During these conversations, also explore direct questions such as “What can we/your family do to make this year special?,” to help demonstrate that it is a priority of the adults in their life to support them coping through their grief and loss while still making the holiday season special. During these conversations, you may also wish to spend time exploring ways in which previous traditions can be adjusted or even consider opportunities to develop new ones that are still meaningful and symbolic of their family’s values.

By having such conversations with young people, you are helping them to regain a sense of healthy control over their lives which is often lost during times of traumatic events or experiences. If you are unsure of how to start the conversation, there are many developmentally appropriate children’s books and stories available that can be used such as [Kai’s Journey](#), which walks through a young boy’s way of navigating a significant loss in his family. You can locate additional story books about grief and loss [here](#).



Following this lesson, you will want to support your students in developing a coping ahead plan to support them through the upcoming holiday season. While every student in the room may not be experiencing a loss, it is important to keep in mind that holidays can be hard due to other trauma reminders resulting from witnessing or experiencing something scary such as sexual abuse, community violence, domestic violence, or even an increase in family discord or economic hardship. Thus, this plan can serve a multitude of purposes to benefit everyone.

Instruct your students to either pull out a piece of paper or you can use [this template](#) to create this coping ahead plan. First, have your students spend 5-7 minutes reflecting on experiences during the holiday season that have caused them distress in the past or that they anticipate might be hard to navigate or cope with this year. Since this can be a challenging topic to explore, some students may require additional time or guidance to think of these situations.

Once they have had an opportunity to think of these situations, have them record these events in the “IF” column of the paper. Upon completing the “IF” column, have students think about easily accessible coping skills they can use to help address each situation in the “IF” column. Encourage students to think about the coping skills they recently learned from the 30 days of mental health lessons in addition to skills they have found helpful in the past. For high family conflict, they might find it helpful to listen to music to help drown out the sound of the arguments. For loss reminders, they might find it useful to engage in a fun activity that they enjoyed with that person or write them a letter. Other helpful coping skills to provide your students with can be found [here](#). These are merely examples and should be offered to students **only** if they get stuck naming their own.

Finally, have your students identify safe people that they can call on if they need additional support and/or if the coping skills are not helpful.

Additional Activities To Do At School

To best support your students who may be experiencing the loss of a loved one, it is important to have conversations that are from a place of compassion, not pity. It is common and perhaps natural for people to make statements such as “oh you poor thing, I am so sorry,” to children when they are coping with the loss of a loved one. However, these statements can come across negatively and create more distance as opposed to closeness/connectedness. If you are unsure of what to say, it is also completely acceptable to just listen. Silence can be just as powerful as words.

Also as a support person for students coping with a loss, do not be afraid to show emotion that is professionally and developmentally appropriate. Showing and sharing emotions can help to form a sense of connectedness and promote more openness, thereby enabling the student to share more and view you as a safe and trusted adult. Appropriate sharing of emotions helps to normalize grieving.

Consider the activities below to offer students support to cope with their grief. Most grieving children need assistance expressing and processing their feelings. If there has been a substantial amount of grief and loss among students, these activities can be done as whole class activities. Supporting students through classroom activities is critical because many students who need support will not be seen by the school mental health professionals.



- **Writing about the loss** by giving your students writing prompts such as:
 - Grief feels like _____.
 - The best thing someone did to help me feel better was _____.
 - I like to think of my loved one doing _____.
 - The thing I remember most about my loved one is _____.
- **Have the student make a card** for the deceased person and inside of the card, write a few of the reasons why that person is special to them.
- **Developing a memory box** to help students remember the deceased person and have a safe place to put things that belonged to that individual as well as art or writings in remembrance of that person. This will take about 45 minutes to complete, and can be spread across several days.
 - Materials needed: Shoe boxes with lids, photos and personal items of the person who died, construction paper, magazines, scissors, and glue.
 - Have the students decorate their box with materials, pictures and photos, etc. Then ask them to place memory objects, pictures, poems or written memories in the box. Lastly, allow students to share with the group.
- **Create a scream box** that gives children permission and a secret/safe place to experience tough emotions associated with the loss. The box will be designed in a way that allows for screams to be muffled so that no one can hear them when they use it.
 - Materials needed: Empty box (e.g. shoe or cereal box), newspapers, a box of tissues, plus a paper towel tube, tape, and items to decorate the outside of the box, such as colorful paper, markers and stickers.
 - Fill the box with crumpled up newspaper, then close the top of the box. Next, mark and cut out a circle on the top of the box using one end of the paper towel tube. Make sure the hole is big enough to insert the paper towel tube. Place the paper towel tube into the hole in the box, leaving half of it sticking out of the box top. Tape the tube in place (half in/half out) and stuff the tube halfway with tissue. They can wrap the box and the tube with colorful paper and decorate with markers, stickers, or anything they want to personalize the box.



It is also important to continue with classroom routines, supportive discipline, and high expectations. Continuing the usual routines and expectations at school can offer a sense of comfort and are essential for students trying to restore a sense of normalcy during times in which they are coping with a traumatic event. Although students who are grieving may need some room to not be their “usual self” emotionally or even behaviorally, they may also benefit from functioning as normally as possible.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Use this discussion prompt to have students discuss healthy coping strategies for coping with grief and loss during the holidays.

- What is a new holiday tradition that could be started to celebrate someone who has passed, such as making one of their favorite dishes?
- How can someone who is having a hard time coping with their grief and loss this holiday season tell their loved ones (e.g. family, friends) that they are struggling with the loss and might not want to celebrate this year?
- What are ways that families, friends, and neighbors can help someone who is grieving?





GRADE LEVEL MEDIA TO FOR STUDENT REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- **All Grades**
 - [Managing grief on holidays and special day](#)
 - [Meditation for coping with grief and loss](#)
- **Grades K - 3**
 - [Seven ways to help grieving children during the holidays](#)
 - [Sesame Street: Giving hearts time to heal](#)
- **Grades 4 - 7**
 - [Five things to help cope with grief during the holidays](#)
 - [The heart and the bottle: book about death, loss and grieving](#)
- **Grades 8 - 12**
 - [How to deal with grief if it's your first holiday without a loved one](#)
 - [Grief out loud: Teens discuss loss](#)



Use the graphic organizer on the next two pages to help students process their feelings.

RESOURCES TO SUPPLEMENT YOUR LESSON:

- [Supporting grieving children in times of COVID-19](#)
- [In support of children, teens, and families](#)
- [Helping grieving children](#)

RESOURCES FOR YOU TO LEARN MORE:

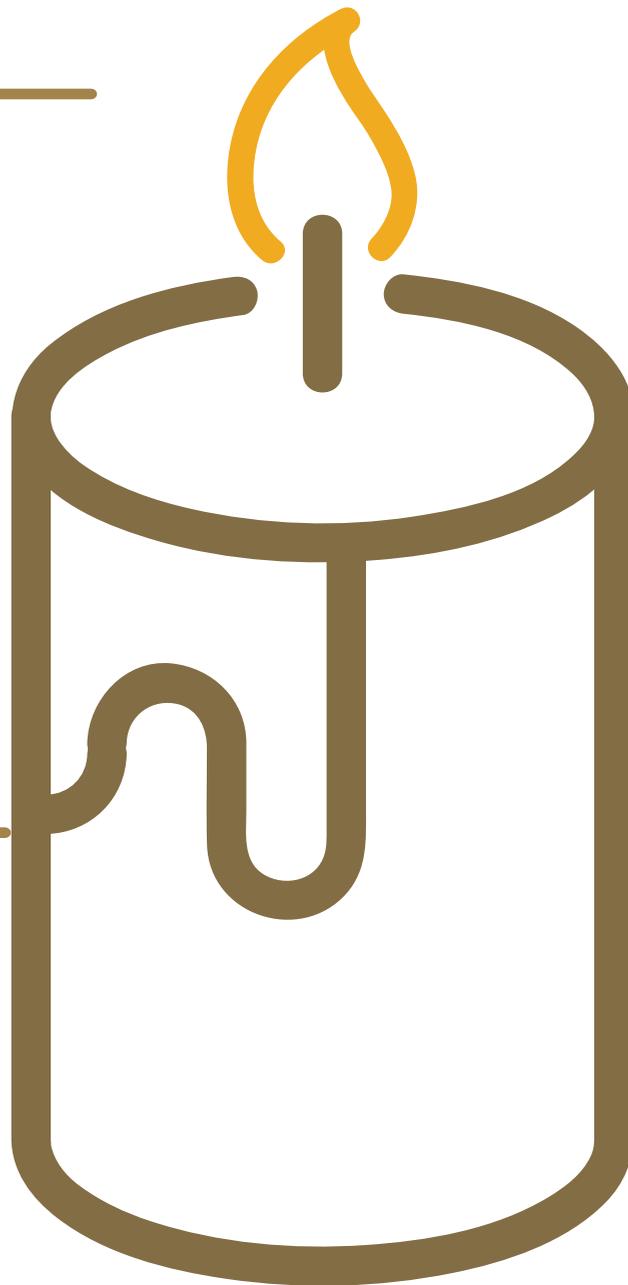
- [The Dougy center for children and families](#)
- [Supporting children through grief](#)
- [Seven ways to help grieving children during the holidays](#)

RESOURCES TO SHARE WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS:

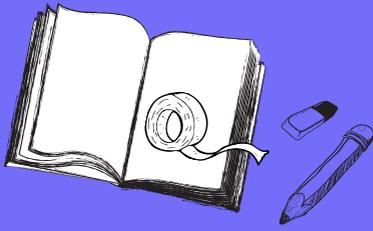
- [Holiday tips for grieving families](#)
- [Seven tips to support grieving children during the holidays](#)
- [Grief during the holidays](#)
- [Parents supporting their children mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

Light a Candle Memorial to Remember Our Loved Ones During the Holidays

Help students to list some of their favorite memories of and feelings of sadness about the person who passed on. Once some favorite memories and feelings have been listed, consider lighting a candle and reading them aloud.



Activity for Older Children



My Grief Journal

Read the prompts below and respond by filling each space provided with images and words that come into mind.

My greatest memory with you:

I miss you because:

I smile when I think of you because...

It is OK to be sad when I miss you because...

Share Your Grade Level Adaptation

Email it to info@30DaysOfMentalHealth.org

Please share your grade level adaptations with us and we will share it with other educators that have taken the pledge.

Email us your name, name of school, and grade level for the adaptation. Describe your adaptation and/or attach it to your email.

The 30 Days of Mental Health lesson are developed by the TREP Project.

The **TREP Project** is a research-practice translation project that works to connect research on the science of trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.

