

Supporting children, youth and their caregivers with crisis and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic



David J Schonfeld, MD, FAAP
Director, National Center For School Crisis And Bereavement
Children's Hospital Los Angeles
schonfel@usc.edu



NATIONAL CENTER
FOR SCHOOL CRISIS
AND BEREAVEMENT

In partnership with



NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION

Potential Symptoms of Adjustment Reactions

Fears & Anxiety;
School
Avoidance

Sleep problems;
Change in
Appetite

Difficulties with
Concentration &
Academic
Performance

Sadness &
Depression

Anger &
Irritability;
Distrust &
Suspiciousness

Alcohol & Other
Substance Use

Physical
Symptoms

Grief

Guilt

Watch your media consumption

- Make sure it is a healthy diet; don't consume too much
- Keep informed through focused/periodic attention to trusted sources of information
- If you aren't getting reassured or learning practical actions to take, then disconnect from media
- Limit amount of media exposure – this is a good time to unplug and connect instead with children and family

Talking with and supporting children

- Don't pretend everything is OK – children pick up when caregivers/adults are not genuine and honest
- Children may pick up on concerns primarily of adults
- Provide appropriate reassurance, but don't give false reassurance
- Find out individual child's fears, concerns, skepticism
- Don't tell children that they shouldn't be worried; help them learn to deal with their uncertainty and fear
- Include positive information; present a hopeful perspective

Avoid fear-based approaches

- Excess fear can lead to:
 - Sense of fatalism
 - Discrediting risks if one risk felt to be false or exaggerated
 - Reactive risk-taking and counter-phobic behavior
- Trying to “reassure” people by telling them it could be worse is likely to make them think it will get worse

Strategies for dealing with distress

- Reading or hobbies that promote healthy distraction
- Journaling, blogging, art, music to promote expressions of feelings
- Exercise, yoga
- Appropriate use of respectful humor
- Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, self-hypnosis and guided imagery

Help children identify steps they can take to protect their own health and to help others

Some children may need more assistance

- The pandemic and discussion about the impact on families may remind people of other difficulties – events in the past, ongoing challenges, or concerns about future losses or crises
- Children who were anxious or depressed before the pandemic will likely need more support
- Children may need to focus first on their own needs before they are able to think of needs of others; try not to make them feel guilty for thinking about how this crisis impacts them personally

Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” grieving children
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel)
- Limit sharing of personal loss experiences; keep the focus on the child’s experience
- Allow child to be upset while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern

Grief during a pandemic

- After a death, children often concerned about their health and that of others they care about
 - Help children deal with fears about the pandemic
- Physical distancing/school closure increase social isolation; makes it difficult to provide support
- Secondary losses become even more of an issue
- Family members may be overwhelmed by pandemic
- Some grief may not be related to death
 - Threat to assumptive world; Ambiguous loss
- Supporting grieving children can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times

Acknowledge your own continuing reactions

9

- Fears/anxieties/uncertainties – the pandemic isn't over; an unresolved crisis is still a crisis; secondary stressors are pervasive
- Irritability including from daily hassles
- Guilt for being upset when you aren't the most impacted
- Exhaustion – both physical and emotional
- Unfamiliarity with routines requires more mental effort
- Disappointment – return to “normal” may not feel exciting
- Frustration over continued conflict and polarization
- Grief persists
- Other problems and issues seem overlooked

What you are doing is of value

- Just because we don't know everything, doesn't mean we know nothing of value
- You know strategies that have helped in the past to decrease distress – try them now
- Reach out to colleagues/resources in school district and community when more is critically needed
- Celebrate positive contributions you make
- Set reasonable expectations
- The curriculum has changed – teaching children how to cope → helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient

Challenges to self-care

- Allocating time when there is so much to do and everyone needs your help
- Feeling shame or guilt for attending to your own needs
- Assuming others are having less trouble adjusting
- Lack of modeling of professional self-care

www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESOURCES

[READ MORE](#)

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL CRISIS AND BEREAVEMENT

Dedicated to helping schools support their students
through crisis and loss

[I Need Help Now](#)

[Help Me Prepare](#)



COALITION *to* SUPPORT GRIEVING STUDENTS

Lead Founding Members



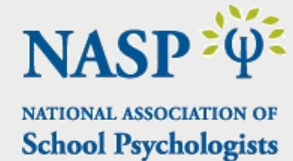
NEW YORK LIFE
FOUNDATION



Founding Members



School Social Work
Association of America



Supporting Organizational Members



DOES YOUR SCHOOL NEED ADVICE NOW?

Contact us at [877-53-NCSCB \(877-536-2722\)](tel:877-53-NCSCB) or info@grievingstudents.org



Search

Special Resource: COVID-19 Pandemic Response - [Click here.](#)



COALITION *to* SUPPORT
GRIEVING STUDENTS

Video and Downloadable Grief Support
Modules for School Personnel

Conversation & Support

[Talking With Children >](#)

[What Not to Say >](#)

[Providing Support Over Time >](#)

[Peer Support >](#)

[VIEW MODULES](#)



www.grievingstudents.org

Order Free Materials (download)



After a loved one dies—

How children grieve and how parents
and other adults can support them.

For further information about NCSCB
visit us, call us, like us, share us



NATIONAL CENTER
FOR SCHOOL CRISIS
AND BEREAVEMENT



1-888-53-NCSCB (1-888-536-2722)



www.SchoolCrisisCenter.org | info@schoolcrisiscenter.org



[@schoolcrisisorg](https://twitter.com/schoolcrisisorg)



National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement