

Talking Points Regarding the Death of a Student

Common Struggles

People sometimes struggle with what to say following the death of a student, especially when that student was enrolled in your class or worked in your office. Some think it's not their job to address issues of grief; others worry their words would be inadequate, still others may want to address the loss but may not know what to do or say.

Should I still hold classes?

Yes, as a sense of normalcy, routine, and connecting with peers helps the grief process. That said, if a student requests to miss class due to grief, we recommend allowing this without punitive action for at least one to two class periods. If a student needs to miss more than 1-2 classes, the student should be referred to campus resources.

Should I reschedule tests or project due dates?

Each professor can make their own decision, but students will likely be less focused and capable after the loss of a peer.

Should I say something to the class / work study students?

It is our strong recommendation that if a student passes away, *the professor, staff or administrator should acknowledge the loss*. Acknowledging the loss allows other students in the class / office to see that the deceased student also mattered to the professor / professional staff. Additionally, students will be more likely to let the professional know if they are struggling in the class / at work due to grief if there is an acknowledgment of how difficult these issues can be.

Should I dedicate an entire class period to processing the loss?

Unless you are extremely comfortable with grief; students being emotional; and providing referrals to distressed students, in most cases, this is not a recommended plan of action. Students who were very close to the person who passed away might find this level of interaction upsetting if others in the room aren't equally affected. Other students who don't have a strong reaction to the loss might find this level of interaction uncomfortable.

What if I am uncomfortable with grief and don't say anything?

There are several reasons that not addressing the loss isn't the best approach. First, not addressing the loss tends to worsen grief for the students. Second, the students can interpret the lack of acknowledgement as uncaring or even cold, and some students take away the message that students are simply not important. Most professionals would strongly disagree with these perceptions, which is why addressing the loss is important. Third, given Siena

College's Catholic Franciscan mission and its focus on caring for the whole person while being in right relationship with one another, not addressing the death might be perceived as a lack of compassion on the part of the entire institution (not just a single faculty / staff / administrator).

What if the student was not in my class?

Most students would still be appreciative if there was an acknowledgment of the loss since the entire community will be impacted to some degree.

What should I say?

You do not have to turn a class session or work day into a grief group to effectively address the death of a student. For example, at the very least, it is recommended that you acknowledge the loss and offer campus resources to students who may be grieving:

"As you might be aware, (name of the student) passed away unexpectedly. Please remember there are resources on campus to help with your grief: Chaplain's Office; Health Promotion; and the Counseling Center are just a few examples."

If you feel comfortable you can add: *"It's a shock and a terrible loss. If you need to step out of the class /office today, that's ok."*

If you are willing to engage students further and offer additional support, you may continue by saying:

"If you need to talk to me about this in more depth, please let me know. Does anyone want to say anything before we move forward with today's topic / work assignment?"

What if a student gets really upset in my class or while working in my office?

Most students are able to continue with work or lessons after an acknowledgment of the loss. For the rare student who gets very upset at work or in class, it would be recommended to take a break, check in with the student, and refer to appropriate resources.

How much should I be a resource for students in distress after a loss?

Generally speaking, people should not feel an obligation to be available for grief counseling after a student passes away. If a student continues to struggle (e.g., always tearful at work or in class; missing multiple days of work / classes; changes in quality of work), please refer them to campus resources.

How do I take care of myself?

The death of a student can bring-up difficult memories or experiences for faculty, staff and administrators as well as students. Make sure you 1) know your personal limits about what you

can take on regarding grief and 2) know your campus resources. If necessary, it is ok to get additional help for yourself too.

What, if anything, changes about these suggestions if the student dies by suicide?

A death by suicide can be extremely upsetting for the entire campus community. Sometimes, responses to suicide are different than a loss from an accident or physical health issue. Generally speaking, *you should follow the guidelines above, but* with a few extra cautions about pitfalls to avoid. Please remember after a suicide:

- * Every student who is grieving does not require counseling or crisis intervention. You can ask students what strategies they have in place to care for themselves. If the student needs a referral, by all means, please provide one, but it shouldn't be your default response for all students.
- * Avoid trying to guess what was happening for the student who passed away or finding someone or something to blame. It is understandable and normal to try to make sense of a tragedy, but trying to assign blame can divide students or the community when everyone is trying to come together.
- * Avoid quizzing the students about their relationship with the deceased or trying to get information.
- * Try very hard to avoid saying "S/he is happier now," or "S/he is in a better place." For students, faculty, and staff that are not depressed or suicidal, these sound like comforting words. For students who have contemplated suicide, these words can accidentally send the message that dying is better than living with depression and suicidal thoughts.
- * If engaging with a student on the topic of suicide, try to use preferred language:
 - We say, "died by suicide" and not "committed suicide" because we don't want to equate this loss to committing a crime or a sin. We don't say, "committed a heart attack"; rather, we say, "died of a heart attack". Similarly, "successful suicide" or "unsuccessful attempt" are considered poor choices because they connote an achievement or something positive even though they result in tragic outcomes.

Reference

Sanger, C. S. (October 24, 2017). What to say after a student dies. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.