

BEREAVEMENT, LOSS AND GRIEF—GUIDANCE 4

Information for School Staff: Staff Support and Self Care

Staff health and wellbeing is paramount when you are supporting children and young people who are experiencing bereavement and loss. There are a number of steps that can be taken to avoid staff becoming overburdened or distressed.

Policies

Use your organisation's policies and protocols to help give you the confidence and support to deal with children and young people experiencing bereavement and loss, for example managing critical incidents and child protection.

Training

Access training to help you support children and young people experiencing bereavement and loss. Staff can identify training needs and training opportunities with their line manager.

Occupational Health

East Lothian Council has an Employee Assistance Programme that provides confidential support for you at work on all matters relating to your health and wellbeing. This includes access to specific programmes and counselling services.

Line Manager/Supervisor

Staff require support and supervision to work confidently, professionally and effectively with children and young people experiencing bereavement and loss. The levels of support required will vary according to the staff member's particular circumstances, for example their role and experience. In addition to formal supervision and training staff may find some or all of the following helpful:

Offloading: Opportunities to 'let off steam' and discuss the difficult issues and feelings around working with children and young people experiencing bereavement and loss.

Recognition: Acknowledgement and appreciation of the challenges of this work and for efforts and progress made.

Sharing ideas: The chance to discuss the work with others, sharing ideas and gaining insights.

Healthy Working Lives

HWL are developing a Listening Ears service through a team of volunteers—colleagues who have received mental health first aid training to be helpful empathic listeners and can signpost you to appropriate sources of support if required. A list with volunteer names and contact details is available on the authority's intranet.

How to help yourself

Supporting bereavement, loss and grief is an intense emotional experience. Everyone needs help to carry out this demanding role. Here are some ideas to help you do this:

Share feelings

Talk about how you are feeling and share your experiences. Just knowing that others are affected can help you to feel less alone and more able to cope. Informal peer support in the staffroom can be a welcome opportunity to talk through issues and concerns and reduce feelings of inadequacy by jointly talking through strategies to help.



Anticipate having an emotional reactions

It is perfectly normal to be emotionally affected. However, recognise that in order to help others, you need to feel reasonably strong yourself. Previous losses in your own life may resurface. Do not be afraid to say if it feels overwhelming. This is not a sign of weakness, merely a recognition that we all have our limits.

Factors that can contribute to overload

The following factors have been cited as contributing to staff stress:

- ◆ Witnessing pain and distress experienced by the families.
- ◆ Feeling unskilled in dealing with emotional responses.
- ◆ Physical exhaustion as a result of emotional trauma.
- ◆ Poor communication.



You do not need to be an expert to provide effective help

Many people feel inadequate and out of their depth when faced with adults or children experiencing deep sadness or trauma. Being alongside children who are hurting can remind us of our own vulnerability and immortality. Most teachers and school staff are caring individuals who naturally have the characteristics required to support bereaved children. You can do this by being there for them in school and building a relationship with them.

Professional boundaries

When working in a school environment it is very easy to take on too much. Getting over-involved is not helpful to either yourself or to the bereaved child or adult. Remember that you cannot carry their grief for them, but you can share their journey by being there for them and being aware.



It does not help to offer something that you cannot deliver

Always try to be realistic with the amount of support that you can give. It is much better to offer something small but constant rather than a grand gesture that is going to be difficult to deliver. Providing a listening ear once a week and sticking to it is more meaningful than the offer of help anytime when inevitably that cannot be achieved within a busy school environment.

How to help yourself...continued

Have information to hand

Have information guides (available within the guidelines) to hand when you are meeting with children, young people and their families. Share these with them to support their understanding and responses. You may also want to signpost families to organisations that support children, young people, parents and carers.



Help others

If you become aware that a colleague is stressed or affected by a death in your school community, or know that they have experienced a bereavement themselves, find the time to ask how they are.

Take care of yourself

Make time to do something just for you, give yourself a treat. Physical exercise can be extremely helpful.

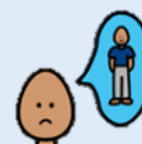


Try to recognise when you are running on empty

Working in a school involves giving lots of your time and energy; supporting a bereaved pupil may compound this, resulting in depleted resources. It can be difficult to ask for help when we most need it as it takes energy and strength. Some of the signs to look out for include feeling physically exhausted and overworked, an inability to delegate and generally not feeling on top of things.

If you have been recently bereaved

It is recommended that you do not work directly with a bereaved child or young person until you feel ready.



This guidance is part of a 'Bereavement, Loss and Grief' collection that aims to provide parents, carers and school staff with information to help them understand and support any bereaved child or young person.

Parents, carers and school staff might also find the following helpful:

- ◆ 'Bereavement, loss and grief: Developmental stage and understanding'
- ◆ 'Information for parents/carers: How to support children and young people with bereavement, loss and grief'

School staff might also find the following helpful:

- ◆ 'Information for school staff: How to support children and young people with bereavement, loss and grief'