



## Responding Appropriately to Death Crises at School

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

**Purpose:** To be proactive rather than reactive in any current or potential "crisis" situation

### I. Creating the Crisis Plan

- a. **Crisis Plan Type I = General Plan.** The simpler, the better -- step 1, step 2, etc. -- can be used in any situation (include a listing of local professionals from various disciplines who can be called in, if needed)
- b. **Crisis Plan Type II = Specific Plan.** Specific to a known situation. May need to adjust crisis team members. Confirm outside support.

\* Make plans accessible to everyone.

### II. Creating the Crisis Team

- a. Identify those who are interested and able to be a part of the crisis team. Put a timeline on the commitment (i.e., 2 year 'term'). Of those interested, consider dividing into Tier 1 (first responders) and Tier 2 (back-up to first responders).
- b. This team should meet prior to or right at the beginning of each school year to confirm members and review current plan(s) in place.
  - i. Create a Crisis Team GROUP TEXT and/or EMAIL.
  - ii. Determine who the MEDIA SPOKESPERSON will be.
  - iii. Determine who the family liaison will be - this is typically determined at the time of the crisis.

### III. Important Considerations for **STUDENTS & FAMILIES**

- a. **FACTS** - as soon as possible, a clear explanation of what has occurred should be announced to the students; this will help to limit confusion and the spreading of rumors. *[As soon as possible, information should also be shared with parents in the school community via an email/ letter from the principal or superintendent.]*
  - i. Honesty
  - ii. No Euphemisms
  - iii. Prepared Statement:
    1. A statement should be prepared by the crisis team which clearly explains the facts. This statement will then be read to the students by staff or team members so that consistency is assured. This also needs to take into consideration the emotional state of staff members; it is much easier to read a prepared statement at the time of a crisis.
- b. **QUESTIONS** - a time for the asking/answering of questions must be set aside ASAP, preferably with a crisis team member.
- c. **CONTINUED UPDATES** - as soon as new information is learned, this should be passed along to the students as well (i.e., new facts, funeral information, the school's response, etc.)

- d. **PARTICIPATION** - students should be given the opportunity to participate where appropriate

- i. Attending funeral/memorial services
- ii. Helping to plan a way for the school to honor the person, if it was a death:
  - Yearbook
  - Fundraisers
  - Plaque
  - Bulletin "memory" board
  - Balloon, butterfly or dove release

\* Solicit students' ideas – some will be viable others not, but get their input!

- IV. **SHARING/DEBRIEFING** – provide a safe space for the students to gather with members of the crisis team. Provide simple activities for the students to express their grief and honor the person who died. Projects where the students can create something that will be displayed or given to the family are always helpful and healing.

V. **Important Considerations for STAFF**

- a. In addition to the Crisis Team, all staff should **be familiar** with the main steps to plan **prior to a crisis occurring**:
  - What is the ORDER in which things will typically occur? (i.e., what to expect)
  - How will information be disseminated when a crisis occurs?
  - Where do we meet and what time?
  - What to expect at the meeting and during the remainder of the day?
- b. **DEBRIEFING**
  - i. Timing not an issue; just so it is offered
  - ii. Can be formal or informal
- c. **SUPPORT**
  - i. During the crisis time - this might be in the form of assigning "class helpers" during the day so that the teachers have the option to leave if needed.
  - ii. After crisis time - can be formal or informal: scheduled sharing times among staff members, or bringing in a grief counselor to facilitate.

- VI. **Response from the school** - If it is a death that has occurred, steps need to be taken to honor the life or lives *no matter what the cause of death...*

- Honors the life of the person who died
- Honors the family of the deceased
- Provides a 'grief touch-point' for all of those affected by the death
- Shows staff and students that if anything were to happen to them, they are part of a caring institution that responds appropriately

*\* If a school-related death occurs during the summer, it would be very appropriate for staff and families to receive a letter from the school in response to that death.*

## VII. Important Considerations regarding Cause of Death

All too often, adults are negatively influenced by the cause of death, particularly if the death was suicide or alcohol/drug-related. It is extremely unhealthy for teens to be denied adequate outlets for their grief based on how or why the person died. The bottom line is: someone special to them has died – regardless of the circumstances of the death. Schools who disallow memorialization because it is a suicide for example, are creating an environment of frustration and hostility for the surviving friends. These survivors are left to feel as if *they* are being punished for their friend's decision. Furthermore, it is, in effect, denying the **life** of that child who died! One of the most important things we can teach our children is how to **honor life**.

- a. **The Glorifying MYTH** - to suggest that we are “glorifying” the cause of death (i.e., suicide) by acknowledging that a student has died is an over-used cliché in many schools. The assumption is that drawing attention to that student in any way will cause the surviving students to kill themselves as well.
  - To “glorify” means to ‘praise’, ‘worship’ or ‘adore’. Acknowledging a student has died is honoring a life that was lived. Those are two very different things.
  - **We can absolutely honor a life without “glorifying” the cause of death.**
  - “Copy-cat” suicides are real. They can occur with people who already are at risk. They are NOT a result of a caring school community honoring the life of a colleague or student and treating the situation with respect, compassion and encouraging peer prevention efforts.