

RESPONDING TO A STUDENT DEATH: HOW TO CREATE A PROACTIVE RESPONSE PLAN FOR YOUR CAMPUS



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Outline

- The presentation will discuss the theory and stages of grief as it applies to the college community.
- The first half of the presentation will focus on grief theory and application to the college community.
- The second half of the presentation will discuss ways to engage community resources to address student death.



***“Healing or grief is a journey,
not a destination. The
journey into our healing asks
us to weave our losses into
the fabric of our lives.”***

Author Unknown

Theory

- One of the more unpleasant tasks facing student affairs divisions and counseling staff is responding to a campus death or tragedy.
- Cintron, Weathers, and Garlough (2007) suggest that university administrators, faculty, and students do not anticipate facing death on campus.
- We hope this training will help better prepare you for the estimated **1,100*** that die from suicide each year on **college campuses.**

www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-05-10/stress-takes-its-toll-on-college-students

Theory

- Any discussion of death or loss begins with the Kübler-Ross model, based on her 1969 book, “On Death and Dying”.
- The stages are outlined as: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance and were originally presented as stages those grieving must pass through to achieve peace.



Theory

- **Denial:** *Conscious or unconscious refusal to accept the facts and information about the current situation. A normal first defense mechanism.*
- **Anger:** *Is expressed differently by each of us. Some express anger towards ourselves, others to those around them.*
- **Bargaining:** *Often involves arguments with God or a higher power for a chance to start over, for the reality to be changed.*
- **Depression:** *They begin to feel the full impact of the loss and the sadness that accompanies the death. Can be a “dress rehearsal” or “practice run” for living with the change.*
- **Acceptance:** *An emotional detachment and objectivity.*

Theory

- **More recently, others (Humphrey, 2009) have suggested that these stages of loss and death are best seen as general guidelines, not a set of arbitrary stages that must be checked off.**
- **Grief is instead an individual process which we all approach based on our experiences, preferences, and coping abilities.**

Question

What have you experienced most recently on your campus?

- a) Car accident death
- b) Alcohol overdose
- c) Completed suicide
- d) Medical emergency
- e) Other (please type in)

Theory

While processing their grief, the college community will likely experience:

- A higher susceptibility to illness
- “Zombie Effect” where feelings shut down your body’s natural coping mechanism
- Difficulty thinking clearly or remember things; as if your brain is “scrambled”
- Continuous crying or overflow of emotions
- Holding onto emotions; unable to cry and instead bottle it up (it will come out years later)

Theory

While processing their grief, the college community will likely experience:

- Staying extremely busy to avoid time to think
- Drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Sighing and daydreaming
- Talking about the death over and over
- Loss of interest in work; home life; physical appearance

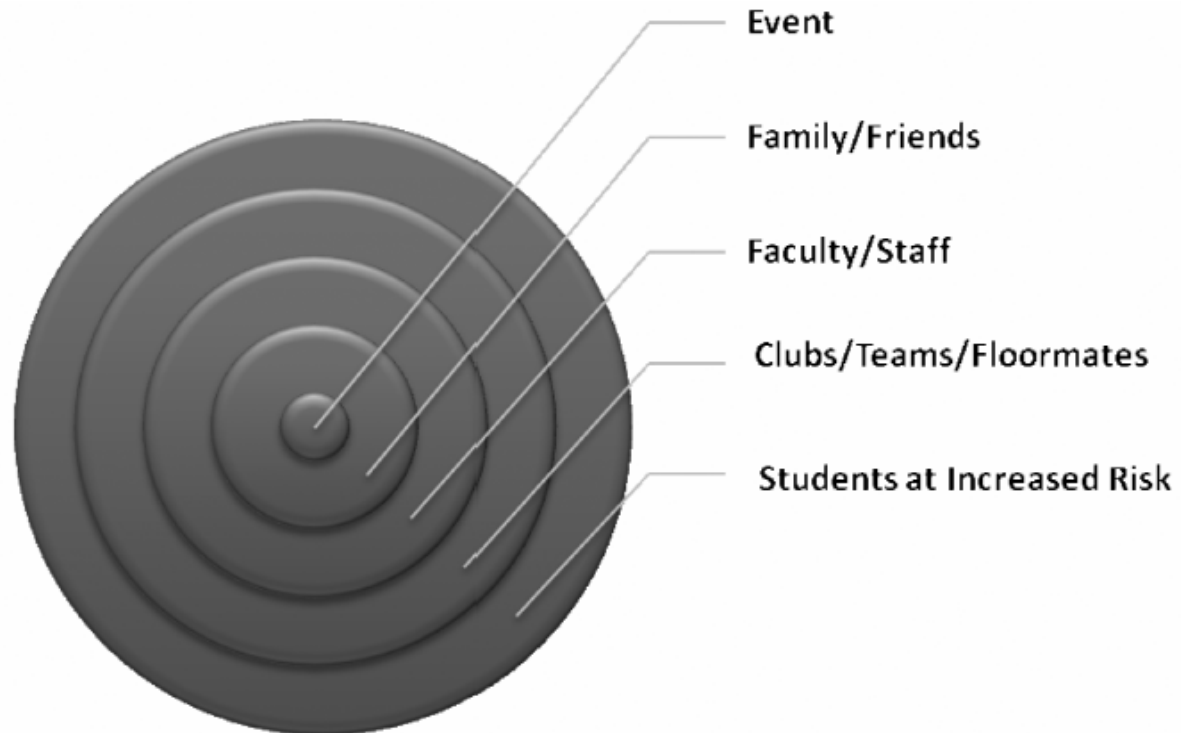
Theory

While processing their grief, the college community will likely experience:

- Engagement in self-criticism
- Feeling as if there is a huge hole in your soul
- Thinking you will never recover from your loss
- Suffering from severe depression
- Seeing no reason to exist or carry on with daily tasks

Theory

When responding to grief, understand the “rock in a lake” effect when identifying groups that need assistance.



Theory

Grief is...

- anything and everything you feel, think, and do following a loss in your life.
- a normal and healthy process that your body, gut, or heart knows how to do but your mind may try to fight.
- individual and situational; it is not the same for everyone, only you can define why you grieve and how you grieve.



Theory



Grief is...

- a process that will scare you, anger you, sadden you, numb you, excite you, and heal you.
- something none of us knows how to do on our own.

Theory

Grieving...

- will not hurt you, it will not make things worse, and it will not make you crazy.
- means not fearing what you feel, but deciding what you will do with your feelings.
- takes as long as it takes.



Theory

Rules for grief...

- Make a point to eat and sleep even if you are not hungry or tired.
- Keep up your daily routine as much as possible.
- Don't compare yourself to others; this is your grief.

Theory

Rules for grief...

- Take time to be by yourself if you need it, but don't isolate yourself.
- Don't think alcohol, drugs, food, sex, or spending money will help.
- Decide how you will remember the person you have lost; begin to write the story you will tell about them to others.

Question

What have you done following a death to reach out to students?

- a) Campus memorial service
- b) Creation of dedicated spot on campus
- c) Honorary degree
- d) Signed book to be passed around campus
- e) Donation to scholarship
- f) Other (please write in)

Practice

- Identify one central place on campus for information, updates, brief counseling, and memorializing the death, so people know “where to go” during this time of grief.
- Identify staff who will do an impact assessment (i.e., determine who has been affected by the death, such as: roommates, student organization members, co-workers, students from the same hometown, etc.).

Practice

- Encourage the deceased's friends to plan and hold a memorial service.
- This allows them to begin the healing process and provides some direction to their grief.
- Encourage faculty, staff, and counseling services staff to attend the event.

Practice

- If appropriate, involve the campus chaplain or other religious figures to help in the planning of the response. This may be common practice at religious schools and may need some research prior at secular colleges.
- Ensure that the service is both nondenominational and meaningful at the same time. Offer options to students to support their unique, developmental process.
- Campus chaplains can be excellent resources for creating sacred space and services and can generally accommodate differing belief systems.

Practice

- Communicate early with staff and faculty. If the death occurred suddenly, use the university computer system or registrar to find out what classes the student was in.
- Consider having the Counseling staff make phone calls to professors to inform them of what happened.
- Allow the faculty to request that Counseling staff come into their classrooms. Don't require this, but allow individual faculty and departments to make this choice.

Practice

- It is also important to have a coordinated response among student affairs, academic affairs, and various other departments that become involved.
- The motto “We can accomplish more working together than working alone” should be the central theme when responding to loss and grieving.

Practice

How Can You Cope With Grief?

- Talk to family and friends
- Read poetry or books
- Seek spiritual support
- Join a support group
- Be patient with yourself
- Engage in social activities
- Exercise
- Eat good foods
- Seek counseling
- Listen to music
- Let yourself feel the grief
- Take time to relax

Practice

How to Support Others Who Are Grieving

- Ask About their feelings
- Just sit with them
- Ask about their loss
- Make telephone calls
- Let them feel sad
- Do not minimize grief
- Be a good listener
- Share your feelings
- Remember the loss
- Acknowledge the pain
- Be available when you can
- Talk about your own losses



Case Studies

We will discuss two scenarios:

- Student suicide
- Student accidental death



www.studentsofamf.org

www.studentsofamf.org/category/we-get-it/

Case Study #1

Background

- Student takes own life with self-inflicted gunshot
- Student not found for two days
- Local police are first responders to scene
- University police notify DOS
- DOS activates crisis team to meet in office
 - CAPS staff called to assist roommates, friends, etc.
- DOS begins internal notification process on way to office

Case Study #1

Information gathering & notification

- Student information system
- Background information
 - Full student record
 - Facebook and other sources of informal information
- Notification of parents
 - Law enforcement agency in hometown to provide assistance?



Case Study #1

Notification & communication

- Conversation with parents
 - Follow-up with additional information
 - Exchange of telephone numbers
- Continued information gathering
- Notification of additional impacted individuals/groups
- Student death checklist

Case Study #1

Scene assessment & next steps

- What is impact on scene?
 - Any preparations necessary for family to arrive?
- Make local arrangements for family
- Identifying location of student – additional identification needed?
- Ongoing support for impacted students

Case Study #1

Follow-up logistics

- Notification of student service offices (e.g. registrar, bursar, financial aid, student health insurance, housing)
- Notification to faculty advisors
- Announcement to campus community memorializing student
- Consideration of posthumous degree

Case Study #1

Memorial

- Campus recognition (e.g. flag)
- Work with friends, peers, etc.
- Continue contact with family (additional follow-up, e.g. email)
- Send institutional representation to hometown services

Case Study #2

Background

- Student falls from window of residence hall
- Other students around when incident happens
- Residential staff are first responders, followed by campus police
- Many students and campus media immediately hear about incident and proceed to area

Case Study #2

Immediate action

- Get help to campus quickly to manage scene (CAPS, student affairs staff, etc.)
- Designate one staff member to gather information (off-site)
- Be sure to have communications staff come to scene to manage media
- Make quick contact with family to avoid alternative notification if possible

Case Study #2

Impact

- Immediate counseling/support needs will be extensive
- Develop message for release to media sources
- Designate spokesperson (if not implied by university policy)
- Consider alternative arrangements for students in residence hall
- Contact facilities to be ready to clean scene as soon as police are finished

Case Study #2

Follow-up

- Quick story preparation for dissemination to campus community
- Accelerated plans for campus memorial service
- On-going support in-hall from CPS staff
- Additional support for professional and paraprofessional staff
- Long-term plans for location of incident (conduct safety review)

Considerations

- Have one point of contact for family
- Have an institutional policy or understanding of who coordinates death response
- Immediately create a file and keep all phone numbers/documents in one place (take good notes!)
- Do as much research as possible about student
- Don't bother the family too much
- Be willing to make yourself very accessible
- Plan on continued communication with family (e.g. future student events, anniversary of death)

References

- Cintron, R., Weathers, E. & Garlough, K. (2007). College Student Death: Guidance for a Caring Campus. University Press of America.
- Humphrey, K. (2009). Counseling Strategies for Loss and Grief. American College Counseling.
- Iserson, K. & Bollet, A.J. (1999) GraveWords: Notifying Survivors about Sudden, Unexpected Deaths. Gallen Press.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1997). On Death and Dying. Scribner Press.

Things to avoid when addressing student death

- Adopt a simple, one-solution approach to a complex problem
- Develop a “top-down” method to provide support
- Pass responsibility to other departments on campus to “run with it” without discussion
- Simply throw money at the sadness
- View intervention as a “one and done” approach
- Close up the department over fear of litigation

Things to do when addressing student death

- Build from grassroots up, involve students and peers as key stakeholders
- Create spaces for discussion
- Take into account your college or university's specific needs
- Involve staff, faculty, students, parents, alumni, surrounding town---use the entire community
- Look for ways to honor/remember the lost
- Care for the caregivers



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