



Loss, Grief, and Bereavement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented time for all of us. With it has come some amazing stories of kindness, hope and positivity. Unfortunately, it has left many with a sense of **collective loss**. In schools, students have experienced a variety of losses, such as disruptions to their academic learning, lack of access to recreational activities, inability to be with friends and extended family, and missed celebrations of major milestones. Educators have experienced losses too; like interrupted schedules and plans, and separation from students, collegial relationships, and usual classroom life. All of us have experienced a loss of freedom and connection during this pandemic time. Collectively, and cumulatively, this sense of loss can challenge our well-being.

What does collective loss look like in students. **You might see and hear reactions such as:**

<i>Younger Students</i>	<i>Additional Reactions in Older Students</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequently changing mood or emotions• Little motivation or interest in schoolwork, activities• Energy, sleep or appetite changes• Difficulty concentrating• Low frustration tolerance, irritability• Increased need for contact and reassurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawal from family activities• Intense wish to be with peers• Increased need to assert independence (which may look like defiance)• Interest in activities from younger years• Questioning fairness, trying to make sense• Worries and fears about the safety of family, friends, self

Support For All

Educators are a key resource for students, helping them to understand and process world events and local issues, promote wellness, and build skills for resiliency. While it can be a challenge to keep a watchful eye on students during remote learning, this connection with a caring adult can make all the difference to support students as they experience this sense of collective loss. Name this experience, to help students find language to express their own feelings about the pandemic and other events within the context of their culture/faith/identity. This can help to normalize the unsteady emotions they may encounter.



Support For Some – When Students Are Having Difficulty Coping With Loss

It is typical that students might experience some intense emotions, like distress, sadness, low motivation, distractibility, etc. during this pandemic. However, you may notice that a student's reactions are even more heightened than expected during these challenging times. Recognize that students have a range of experiences that may differ vastly from your own, your role as a caring adult is to convey a sense of calm, to validate their feelings, and to demonstrate your support.

You may want to guide older students to on-line resources that can help them cope (e.g., [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#), [Kids Help Phone](#)), or you may wish to help students to practice everyday mental health strategies that can help them to feel more positive and in control (e.g., [four finger affirmation](#), [deep belly breathing](#), [mood diary](#)).

*Remember, you are not expected to be a mental health professional. If you have concerns about a student, contact your school team, following your boards' pathways and processes. **If you believe that a student is in crisis and needs emergency support, call 911.***

Support For A Few – When Students Have Been Affected By Death Of A Loved One

During the pandemic, some students will experience the death of a loved one, or multiple deaths within their community. Bereavement can lead to deep pain and sadness. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to death and affects us cognitively, physically, spiritually, emotionally and behaviourally. Note that the expression and experience of grief is often centered within the context of culture, faith, and identity.

You might see and hear reactions such as:

- Intense, frequent / fluctuating, and long-lasting difficult emotions, such as sadness, shock, disbelief, fear, guilt and anger
- A sense of denial, or becoming withdrawn, distracted, irritable or angry as they try to make sense of the loss
- Difficulty regulating emotions, concentrating on tasks, remembering things, etc.

The context of collective loss may increase the complexity of grief reactions. It is important to remember that during the pandemic:

- Families may not have been able to see or care for their loved ones due to physical distancing
- The usual outpouring of support by friends, family, neighbours and the community cannot occur in the same face-to-face manner
- Typical family/community/spiritual/cultural/religious rituals have not been possible
- Students may feel more alone at home, and their grief may be overlooked without the usual extra support at these times
- A child's grief may feel more intense since they don't have the distraction of school, friends, and usual activities
- Each person experiences grief differently—even in the same family. Grief is fluid and individualized and has no time frame



In your role as an educator, you can help to support all children with collective loss, some students who are having difficulty coping with loss, and the fewer students who are grieving the loss of a loved one. This chart has some helpful language to help students as they make their way through this troubling time.

	Acknowledge	Bridge	Connect
<p>All Students <i>experience of collective loss</i></p>	<p>ACKNOWLEDGE that students may feel a sense of loss during the pandemic</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It has been hard not to be together to learn. What has been the best part and the most difficult part about not being at school? • A lot of us are missing things we used to take for granted. If you could wave a magic wand, what would be 2 things you would wish for right now? • It is okay to feel sad or upset about things you are missing because of the pandemic. 	<p>BRIDGE the sense of loss that students may feel with the notion of collective loss</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pandemic is different for everyone, but most people could name 1 or 2 things they have lost because of it. • When we hear about other people’s losses, we may feel sad about that. Feeling empathy for others is kind and caring. • It is important to remember that even though there have been losses, there have also been gains. What is something good that has happened? 	<p>CONNECT students to ways that others have found to cope with collective loss</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community has tried to help families with things like drive-pass birthday wishes, signs in windows, and chalk pictures on sidewalks. Have you seen any? • Have you noticed ways that people are coping with all of the changes from the pandemic? • Have you found an activity that has made school closure easier? • Sometimes it is good to try to find a silver lining after a loss. Can you think of any silver linings?
<p>Some Students <i>struggling with loss</i></p>	<p>ACKNOWLEDGE that there are times when everyone feels upset, and that you have noticed that the student is struggling</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many students are feeling upset these days because it feels like everything is going wrong, and they are missing out on things that they were really looking forward to. • Students say that sometimes it feels like it is one thing after another and like it won’t ever get better. • I have noticed you seem to be feeling upset a lot these days. Would you like to talk about it? 	<p>BRIDGE the student’s emotions and behaviors with the pandemic experience, and remind them of coping skills that can help</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is different and I don’t know what the school closure has been like for you, but do you think some of how you are feeling is about that? • Some students tell me that when things start to weigh down on them it can help to use some coping strategies. Want to try some with me? • What has helped you in the past when you have been feeling down or overwhelmed? 	<p>CONNECT students who need more support with resources, school mental health professionals or other helpers</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are some helpful resources on-line that some students are using to help them cope. Here are a few to try. • There are people who work with our school who have special training with mental health and coping. Would you consider talking to my colleague Sue? • What can I do to support you as you navigate things at school. Do you need more time on the next assignment?



<p>Few Students <i>grieving the death of a loved one</i></p>	<p>ACKNOWLEDGE the student's experience of grief and the pain that comes with this, without trying to "fix" or find solutions.</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I heard that your uncle has died. I am so sorry. • Would you like to talk about what happened. Validate and accept all their emotions, "Yes, this is scary, upsetting and unfair". • This is a very difficult time to experience a loss. Because of physical distancing, it can be a very lonely time to grieve. 	<p>BRIDGE the student's experience with the steady, predictable aspects of school, to help to remind them of familiar routines of life.</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are looking forward to having you join class again, when the time feels right for you. • When you come back, we can scale back on assignments and tests for a while, until you get into the routine again. • What has been helpful to you in getting through these difficult times. How can we support you at school? 	<p>CONNECT the student with remote classroom life, reminding them that they are an important part of the class, school and community.</p> <p>Say things like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your culture/faith/family how do people come together after someone has died? Did people come together after your grandma died. Is there some way we can help you to feel part of a community right now? • Ask "Do your friends/classmates know that someone you loved has died?"
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