

Article By **Charles Silberman**. Email Charles at charles.silberman@pgcps.org to ask additional questions. Published on PE Central: 5/23/2011

Dear Charles,

A female student I work with passed away. She was five, and the whole school community is devastated. Do you have any suggestions on how to cope with this for the students and myself and what to expect from the school and school system?

-Mr. G-

Dear Mr. G,

I am so sorry for your terrible loss. I imagine everyone is in a state of shock at the moment. It must be a very painful experience. There is no quick fix here and it is going to take the community a long time to help heal itself from this tragedy. I do not claim to be an expert on this topic, so I have collaborated with a school psychologist and guidance counselor to make sure the information I am sharing is accurate. Even though the chances of losing a student are low, as a physical education teacher it is one of my worst fears. However, I think there is a wealth of perspective that can be gained from facing such a loss. So, I write this not to exploit your pain, but to help answer your question and offer some useful perspective.

The first thing that should occur is that the administrators should notify the teachers of the loss along with a plan of action, and then at the same time a crisis team will be sent to the school. Someone on the faculty level should find out exactly what happened and the details concerning the student, family and the funeral arrangements and find an appropriate time to communicate the information to the staff. Coverage is usually provided so staff can attend the funeral. I would encourage you to go to the funeral. A crisis team member should see the teacher who taught this child separately, as she is most likely extremely upset. The crisis team will stay as long as designated or needed to help the staff and students cope. Ultimately, the leader organizing this will decide who will share the news with each class. As children who need continued help arise, they should be referred for additional support by per county protocol. That is the basic overview of how things are handled on a systematic and school level. Each school operates differently, so some additional things that I have not described may or may not occur in your school.

After the system does its part to help, there are still going to be hardships for everyone who was involved in the child's life. You, no doubt, had a rapport with the child, so it is understandable that you are in pain. I would suggest that you first allow yourself to grieve in your own way and time. The grief process is not a linear process. Everyone grieves differently, and experiences different stages of grief at different times. Grief takes a long time. Be kind to yourself during this hard time. The stages of grief are listed below.

The most widely accepted common stages of grief are:

- **Denial** (This isn't *happening* to me!)
- **Anger** (Why is this happening to *me*?)
- **Bargaining** (I promise I'll be a better person *if*...)
- **Depression** (I don't *care* anymore)
- **Acceptance** (*I'm ready* for whatever comes)

You may decide you want to reach out to a professional for help. That is normal and okay. I would also suggest that you lean on colleagues as they are probably experiencing similar feelings, and this support can help with healing. Other things you can do include journaling, talking to family and friends, getting rest, exercise, or just taking some time out in a quiet place to reflect and morn. Different things work for different people. There is ample literature and websites out there that can offer additional suggestions and resources. Here is one website, for example:

http://www.ehow.com/way_5200830_activities-children-cope-death.html

While you are taking care of yourself, you will undoubtedly have students seeking support.

Once the system and administration has their plan in place, and you have started your grieving process, below are some helpful techniques and guidelines that can support you in helping the students cope. Remember, children grieve differently than adults. Children may be may be irritable, angry, confused, quiet, and may not understand for a long time that the person will not return to school. So be patient, kind, and delicate when supporting the children.

- Have the students draw about a special memory of the child.
- Have students write something special about their time with this little girl.
- The librarian or teachers can read books to the children about the topic of death. There are many books for young children on this subject.
- The children can also be encouraged to write down their feelings in a journal and read their thoughts and feelings to their peers or parents.
- The school may collect money and bring it to the family. Students and families may want to contribute to this, so help make them aware with administrative permission.
- Perhaps there is an event you can do in the school or class to honor the child.
- Be there for the students.
- Empathetically listen to what they have to say.
- You do not have to play therapist or guidance counselor.
- If you feel you have some helpful advice to provide, you may do so.
- If you do not know something or feel uncomfortable, admit your lack of knowledge and involve the school counselor.

In addition to letting yourself grieve and helping support students and staff members, remember that death shows us the fragility of life, and it can also reveal the importance of relationships and people in our own lives. I would urge you and anyone who is dealing with this situation to take time to build those bonds with the people you are surrounded with, including the students and staff. After all, when all is said and done, I believe that the legacy we leave is not material wealth left behind, but the imprint we leave on the people we cross in our lives, especially the students we teach and the staff we see 40 hours a week. So take time to treasure the gift of the relationships that you encounter on a daily basis, and take time to stop and smell the roses.

You can ask me your questions by emailing at Charles.silberman@pgcps.org, sending me a message on Facebook, or finding me on twitter as ThePeGuy.