Responding to and Supporting Anticipatory Grief

Faculty, staff, and students often form close relationships over their time in educational institutions. When colleagues or students are facing a serious illness, their school communities may witness their decline over an extended period. This can result in anticipatory grief, which is why administrators, crisis team members, and educators need to know how to respond.

WHAT IS ANTICIPATORY GRIEF?

Anticipatory grief involves mourning, coping, and planning for one's life in anticipation of an upcoming loss. While this process may help lessen the impact of a loved one’s death, it can also negatively impact the nature of the relationship between the individual and the person they anticipate losing and lead to various symptoms such as depression, anxiety, pain, complicated bereavement, changes in behavior, difficulties in school or work, and physiological symptoms like headaches and stomach pains.

Anticipatory grief can occur in four different phases, which the individual can experience multiple times, at different levels of intensity, and in different orders:

- sadness or depression and the realization that death is inevitable;
- worry for the person who is passing away, feelings of regret for any past disagreements, and intense emotional responses;
- imagining what life will be like without the person who is ill; and
- the physical process of death, funerals and memorials, and saying goodbye to loved ones.

When supporting those experiencing anticipatory grief, it is important to recognize that the individual may oscillate regularly between restoration orientation (e.g., activities of daily living, distractions, and focusing on life) and loss orientation (e.g., focusing on the loss, reminiscing about life before the loss, and feeling the pangs of grief).

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Anticipatory grief can create a difficult balancing act for individuals as they try to navigate the conflicting demands of holding onto and letting go of the ill person. Emotional and informational support from colleagues can be helpful in managing the symptoms and challenges associated with anticipatory grief.

- **Provide resources and information to staff.** Provide teachers, administrators, and other staff with guidelines on how to share information about the death with the school community. It is essential that an appointed person share factual information regularly through meetings, emails, or bulletins to provide updates. Additional communication may include providing informational documents that discuss typical reactions and coping strategies. Include community and mental health referrals for the staff and students in case any additional support is needed. This may include providing information about Employee Assistance Programs, if available.

- **Acknowledge the anticipated loss and reactions.** It is crucial to recognize that a colleague’s or student’s illness may affect some members of the school community more significantly than others. Emotional dysregulation and intense emotions like sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, and helplessness are common during the anticipatory grieving process. It is natural for some people to want to avoid the ill individual because of
the suffering and intense emotions that anticipatory grief brings. In such difficult times, some people may find it hard to express their emotions appropriately, and some may withdraw emotionally before the ill person has passed. In addition, anticipatory grief may impact productivity and quality of work. Allowing individuals ample time and space to provide mutual support is imperative. Encourage staff to express their emotions with their social support networks and with each other. Regardless of their connection with the ill coworker or student, it is important to acknowledge and validate their emotions and experiences.

- **Plan for the loss.** Administration should be prepared to support staff, students, and the community after the loss. This may be akin to a triage plan, determining how information regarding the memorial events will be shared, reviewing district memorial policies, and planning a memorial that follows established policies and best practices. When creating a triage plan, it is crucial to assess various factors such as event variables, risk factors, personal vulnerabilities, threat perceptions, and current reactions that may increase risk for distress.

- **Use proactive coping and making meaning.** Emotional regulation can help manage the experiences and expression of emotions during challenging times. Making meaning can be a complex and vital step. Meaning making is a process in which an individual reflects on their current beliefs about their relationship with the ill individual and imagines how their life may be impacted after their passing. Engaging in traditional rituals and practices or narrative retelling, making memory boxes, or writing letters to oneself to express thoughts and feelings can help with the meaning-making process.

**SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

Anticipatory grief can disrupt academic, behavioral, and social–emotional functioning. Schools should provide personnel with information about signs and reactions to watch out for in students, how to be supportive in the classroom, and how to make referrals for additional support. Similar information can be provided to parents to guide them on how to support their children. Decisions regarding how much information to share with students related to a staff member or student’s life-threatening illness should consider of several factors, such as privacy requests of the ill staff member, peer, or their family; the age of the student; the unique factors in the situation; and community awareness. Developmental considerations are often centered around a child or adolescent’s understanding of death, including its finality, irreversibility, and inevitability, as well as the fact that there are physical reasons someone dies (this understanding typically develops between the ages of 5 and 10).

Children experiencing anticipatory grief may:

- Realize for the first time that an illness can be a reason for someone’s death.
- Struggle to reconcile that the person can be with them for a period of time but that their death is eventual—perhaps anticipated—in a certain time frame.
- Vacillate between awareness of the inevitability of the individual’s death and denial that the event is really going to happen.
- Recognize for the first time that they too will die eventually and that their age does not exclude them from this possibility, especially if the anticipatory grief is associated with an ill peer.
- Withdraw emotionally from their relationship with the individual who is terminally ill long before they die. This can result in guilt and shame caused by the desire to withdraw from the individual or wishing the individual would die to keep them from the suffering they are experiencing.

Specific supports that school personnel can provide to students include:

- Opportunity for open dialogue to ascertain students’ understanding of the event and their emotional states.
- Classroom meetings to present facts, if determined to be appropriate.
- Opportunities to engage in meaning-making tasks (i.e., memory boxes, cards, journaling).
- Stability and routine.
- Opportunities for students to obtain support from their social networks.
SUMMARY

Anticipatory grief is the distress, sorrow, and anxiety experienced by someone in the days, weeks, months, or years prior to the death of a loved one. Although each situation is unique, there are ways for administrators, crisis teams, and other staff to support individuals in the school setting who are struggling with anticipatory grief. Plans for guidance and support must be developed in a culturally and socially responsive way. Collaboration among administrators, school crisis team members, and the ill individual’s family is key. Information sharing, social support, and routine can all be helpful. Providing opportunities for the expression, validation, and normalization of feelings are other strategies that can facilitate healing.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


Authored by: Sam Felts and Melinda Cruz

Please cite this document as: Felts, S., & Cruz, M. (2024). Responding to and supporting anticipatory grief [Handout]. National Association of School Psychologists.