

WS1 Handout 21: Memorials: Special Considerations When Memorializing an Incident

When a tragedy occurs at a school, there often is a call for the creation of a memorial to remember or commemorate the loss or tragic event. Many recommendations, special considerations, and decisions will need to be made in the emotional aftermath of a school crisis. This handout highlights and addresses some key points for your memorial committee to consider when your school is faced with the challenge of designing a memorial following an incident.

The Purpose of a Memorial

Memorials are a way for students, staff, and the community to express their grief. Because they are often group events, they serve to normalize feelings. Memorials can also be learning events for children and opportunities for students to take an active role in the grieving process.

Depending on the age of your students, many of them will not have much experience, if any, with death and the grieving process. Therefore, part of the response will be to teach students about the grieving process and what to expect at memorial services, events, or activities. Children may learn about customs, rituals, and the different kinds of reactions and emotions they can expect to have themselves or see in others. Memorials will likely evoke questions from students, so they should be given time to ask questions. This will help them feel more prepared for the memorial, which may subsequently serve to reduce feelings of anxiety.

Do No Harm

A memorial should “do no harm”—memorial or gathering sites should be safe. For example, if a student has died in a car crash, do not allow students to gather and grieve at the accident site if it is beside a busy street or highway. Keep candles at the memorial site separate from stuffed animals, flowers, and letters and poems. Let students’ questions be the guide; do not force them to discuss or attend the memorial if they are not ready. Making students feel obligated to express themselves or grieve before they are ready may be doing more harm than good. Emotional numbing may be a protective factor for a child during the initial stages of grief.

Types of Memorials

When appropriate, encourage your students to express themselves by providing them with a number of choices in memorial activities. A variety of activities will increase the likelihood that individual students can choose their preferred mode of expression. Choosing to create a memorial—whether permanent, semipermanent, or temporary—is no small decision.

Permanent memorials may include a granite monument, permanent artwork, an engraved stone, or a permanent plaque (e.g., <http://www.columbinememorial.org/Welcome.asp>).

Permanent memorials require careful planning and discussion before any final decisions are made: Is there potential for retraumatization? Are there design, perception, and/or political implications? Other things to consider

are maintenance costs, memorial policies, cultural norms, time commitment, location, management of initial donations, long-term implications, and costs. One large high school district established a policy that no space or place on campus can be permanently named after a person. This district-wide policy decreases the likelihood of permanent memorials and promotes renewable or living memorials.

Semipermanent, renewable, or living memorials may include a tree planting, a memory garden, dedication of a space such as the library or gymnasium, a bench, an annual scholarship, or an annual 5K run. For semipermanent memorials, the school will want to designate how many years the memorial will remain in place.

Temporary memorials may include a nonrenewable scholarship; a temporary website or online memorial; a one-time monetary donation to charity; a message on a poster or banner; a memory book; writing an individual or group letter; keeping a journal; creating a personal song, poem, or other art project; a candlelight vigil; or an impromptu memorial site (collection of balloons, flowers, stuffed animals, and photos). Most temporary memorials are short term, can be given away as a gift or donation, or they will expire or come to an end within a year.

In most school-related deaths, it is most appropriate to create temporary memorials. Temporary memorials allow students, staff, and families to express their grief in a positive and constructive manner.

Memorial Best Practices

- Develop a school- or district-wide policy concerning memorials.
- Suggest having a written “memorial procedures” plan.
- Designate a memorial committee and committee chairperson to make decisions.
- Involve all important stakeholders (students, staff, parents, and community members).
- Be proactive in working with families and students to create appropriate memorials.
- Follow the maxim of “do no harm.” Memorials should not be a source of retraumatization.
- Do not make memorial creation or attendance mandatory.

Although some literature exists regarding memorials, there is not a great deal of empirical research validating the use of memorials. In the crisis preparedness phase, it is recommended that districts develop guidelines about memorials before a crisis event takes place. The guidelines serve several purposes: (a) common definitions; (b) guidance for administrators, especially with an event that is highly emotional; and (c) consistency of implementing memorials between schools and crises.

A memorial committee may be assembled to help develop and promote memorial guidelines and policies. The committee will be responsible for making difficult and sensitive decisions. The committee will need to obtain support and consensus among the stakeholders involved. This is not always an easy task. For example, following a school shooting in Springfield, Oregon, Cathy Paine wrote: “The design and construction of a permanent memorial proved to be one of the biggest challenges of our recovery. Initially, there was a lack of funding and agreement about the details of the memorial design. A second committee was formed and the memorial was dedicated on the fifth anniversary of the shooting. The permanent memorial consists of trees, benches, a basalt pillar, and a memorial fence, which are all located in a small park near the high school.”

Because memorials are group events, it is a time for people to come together and to support one another. Often memorials serve as a gathering place on important anniversaries after an event. If groups are gathering at a memorial site, the memorial committee should make school staff aware of the events so they can provide supervision; monitor student reactions and the appropriateness of the activities; and support students, staff, and community members. If memorials take place off school grounds, at least one school representative should be present, if possible.

Memorials After a Suicide

Memorials following a suicide are particularly important to monitor. The following approaches are recommended:

- Do not make a permanent memorial following a suicide.
- Do not glorify, highlight, or accentuate the event in any way.
- Choose memorials that are temporary, nonrenewable, or in the form of a “living” memorial (e.g., monetary donation to charity or research, purchase of a suicide prevention program for students). These memorials will positively affect surviving students as opposed to glorifying the students that died by suicide, which increases the risk that others will copy the act.

Every decision made regarding memorials after a student suicide will be extremely important, because it may help prevent the death of another student. It has been estimated that 100–200 students die each year in suicide clusters. School administrators and mental health staff can help by making recommendations not to establish permanent memorials after a death by a suicide. Memorials following a suicide may glamorize death or communicate that suicide is an appropriate or desired response to stress. School staff should discourage whole-school assemblies, full-page dedications in a yearbook, establishment of a scholarship, flying a flag at half mast, or any long-term commemoration. Spontaneous memorials (balloons, flowers, pictures, and letters) should be removed or allowed for only a short time.

Having an established school policy that addresses memorials in the district, and educating students, staff, and parents, will help to alleviate potential hard feelings and resentment by those who may not understand the reasoning for this approach and may be upset by it. Addressing the requests of grieving parents is easier when administrators can refer to a school policy. Decision makers need to remember that their primary concern should be about the surviving students that are left in their care. Otherwise, saying no to a memorial can be misinterpreted as the school not caring or being insensitive.

Memorials: A List of “Dos and Don’ts”

Memorial events and activities can be healthy venues that promote emotional expression and provide a sense of hope and recovery for those who participate. This list will serve as a quick guide for school officials who will ultimately be making decisions to best support students.

DOs	DON'Ts
<p>DO designate a chairperson and/or committee to oversee current and future memorial activities.</p> <p>DO create or refer to school policies that specifically address memorial plans and procedures.</p> <p>DO provide a variety or range of memorial activities for students so they can choose their own way of expressing grief.</p>	<p>DO NOT underestimate people’s intense emotions, such as anger, sadness, or the resurfacing of past losses or traumas at memorial events.</p> <p>DO NOT pathologize normal grief reactions (consider handing out information about “common grief reactions”).</p> <p>DO NOT mandate that students attend or participate in memorial events or funeral services.</p>

DOs	DON'Ts
<p>DO promote memorials and activities that foster a sense of hope, recovery, and positive action.</p> <p>DO educate students about memorial behavior and expectations (e.g., people may express their emotions openly at a memorial).</p> <p>DO provide a variety of age-appropriate memorial activities that reflect the student's developmental stage.</p> <p>DO give permission for students to leave a memorial event if they do not feel comfortable and suggest an alternate activity (recommended that staff supervise students that leave).</p> <p>Do provide students and staff with additional options (counseling, talking to a trusted adult) should they become overwhelmed with emotions and need additional support.</p> <p>DO disseminate facts and provide information to parents and staff about crisis reactions and adaptive and maladaptive coping responses.</p> <p>DO demonstrate awareness and sensitivity toward culturally related expressions, practices, and activities.</p> <p>DO closely supervise all memorial events to make sure they are appropriate, safe, and follow the maxim of "do no harm."</p> <p>DO monitor individuals at memorial events and make sure they are linked with or referred to mental health professionals, if needed. (Students indicating self-harm or violent intent need to be referred immediately.)</p> <p>DO promote "living" memorials that benefit others (e.g., donations for a suicide prevention program).</p>	<p>DO NOT designate permanent memorials, plaques, or pages in a yearbook for students that die by suicide.</p> <p>DO NOT glorify or accentuate any temporary memorials for a student that dies by suicide.</p> <p>DO NOT hold an assembly after the death of a student who died by suicide (to minimize glorification of the student's death).</p> <p>DO NOT close school or dismiss early to allow students and staff to attend a funeral (students and staff should be permitted to attend on an individual basis).</p> <p>DO NOT allow any form of subtle or obvious gang representation such as symbols or colors.</p> <p>DO NOT announce the death of a student over the intercom system (classroom announcements are more personal).</p> <p>DO NOT encourage funerals to be held at a school.</p> <p>DO NOT allow memorials to be placed at the entrance of a school (memorials need to be optional).</p> <p>DO NOT attempt to have the school provide all memorials (community groups may also provide venues and activities as a remembrance or commemoration of the event).</p>

Note. Adapted from *Memorial activities at school: A list of "Do's and Don'ts."* http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety

Remembrance or commemoration T-shirts have gained in popularity but can present potential problems. Most often, school staff may not be aware of the T-shirts until multiple students are wearing the T-shirts. Questions to discuss when forming memorial policies include: (a) Will T-shirts be allowed? If not, what other alternative memorial activities can be suggested to students? (b) If no T-shirts are allowed and students violate policy, how will the administration handle the violation? Will the staff have students remove or cover the T-shirts or will they send the students home?

(c) If T-shirts are allowed, can they be created to memorialize a student who was involved in illegal or gang activities? (d) How long is it appropriate for students to wear the shirts? (e) Can students wear them for more than a week, more than a month, or for the rest of the year? These are challenging decisions for schools and districts to make; thus the importance of developing consistent policies.

Many decisions must be made when creating a memorial following a school crisis or tragedy. It is important for school districts to proactively establish memorial policies and procedures before a crisis occurs. Establishing a committee to help guide the creation of appropriate memorials will allow students, staff, and community members an opportunity to grieve and express themselves in a manner that promotes healthy healing.

Resources

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- Paine, C. K. (2007, January). *Hope and healing: Recovery from school violence*. Paper presented at the Confronting Violence in Our Schools: Planning, Response, and Recovery symposium of the Public Entity Risk Institute. Retrieved from: https://www.riskinstitute.org/peril/images/file/Paine_HopeandHealing.pdf
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