

YOUTH IN GRIEF

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from any of the following:

- **the truth** about what has happened. If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This is both a sign of respect for the students' integrity as well as essential for your credibility.
- **the opportunity to talk about the event** as well as other similar events in their lives. This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Too, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.
- **understanding that this event might be a "trigger"** which is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat or fear. It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something frightening in their histories.
- **staff and other adults in their lives understanding that**, if they come from a chaotic or dysfunctional home, their abilities to cope with grief and tragedy at school is likely diminished.
- **being allowed to use the Safe Room (or "Drop In Center")** even if they didn't know the deceased. Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on academics until they've had the opportunity to process some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the Safe Room and, as long as they aren't disrupting the process or changing the "feel" of the room in a negative way, they may benefit in ways we don't know.
- **help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students about whether they've ever been to a funeral, what it was like for those who have, and what you know about this one.
- **continued structure in the schedule for the day.** Often, students can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule and showing up for all or many of their usual classes, because there is a sense of routine. For those classes in which this student was enrolled, it is helpful to suspend the academic process and acknowledge the loss. Allow students to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period.
- **consistency in discipline**, with flexibility. Often at times such as this, students feel as if life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behavior is not within the usual realm of the classroom. This may be more evident in the dorms than in the classrooms. Exceptions may be made in regard to expectations of how much academic work gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of school life that do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure. Students do need to be held accountable for their behaviors, though.

Students do **not** need for you to become an instant counselor. They **do** need for you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged. If your college or university is going through a tragedy or trauma, you might expect that the first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions ebbing and flowing during the day.

Encourage students to:

- **support each other** for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- **put extra energy into friendships.**
- **take good care of themselves** by eating well and getting lots of rest..

