



# Discussions with Fellow Educators About Grief & Losses During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused multiple losses for all of us. Many people have lost a significant person in their lives. Others have suffered from a variety of other problems associated with the pandemic including loss of income, valuable life experiences and quality of life opportunities.

Educators often focus their attention and energy on being available to support their students, which can create an environment that does not enable communicating their own challenges and struggles. This becomes challenging because of the commonality of the loss caused by the pandemic which is shared by everyone. Grief can become the “elephant in the room” which no one wants to acknowledge but influences effective communication and interactions with others. The need for educators to offer support to fellow educators and to accept support personally is paramount as students need instruction and guidance delivered by emotionally available adults during critical periods of their development.

Making contact and talking with other grieving educators will help educators cope with their losses and be more available for their students. But some educators are not sure what to say or how to start the conversation. This discussion guide was developed for this purpose. This support can be offered individually or in a group. It's important to remember that a peer's grief and pain are caused by the death or loss, not by talking about it. Saying nothing about the emotions you may witness in a fellow educator may communicate that you are uncaring, insensitive and unapproving of their sharing their loss experiences with you. You may also be hesitant to ask them about their feelings because you are fearful

of expressing your own feelings about the losses you have suffered. Sharing how you cope with your own emotions and engage in self-care can be very helpful. Creating an environment in your school where all educators feel comfortable sharing their feelings and model appropriate coping behaviors will assist in the recovery process. It all starts with starting the conversation...

## 1. Starting the Conversation with a Fellow Educator

### First Build the Relationship

- **Establish a sense of shared experience/purpose**

*“The pandemic has challenged us all and left us all grieving in some way”*

- **Promise Privacy & Trust**

*“I will not share what you tell me with co-workers or school leadership”*

### Set Boundaries

- **Acknowledge your limitations**

*“I may not be a grief expert or mental health professional, but I am available to listen”*

*“I understand how difficult it can be to share personal feelings at work”*

*“You do not have to disclose anything you believe is too private for me to hear”*

- **Acknowledge how your own personal differences (e.g., school status/work role, race, culture, gender identity/orientation) may limit your full understanding of all they are experiencing and their comfort in sharing with you**

*“I am aware that I will not fully understand all you have experienced but I am available to listen and learn”*

- **Normalize Ambivalence about Discussing Personal Feelings**

*“We both may be hesitant or anxious about discussing losses”*

*“Talking about grief with someone is difficult for both of us but I would like to try”*

*“Sharing about our grief and losses can help us feel we are not alone”*

- **Discussing Grief and Loss is not a Competition**

*“The types of loss people have experienced can range in severity. Some may have lost loved ones, whereas others may have lost experiences or opportunities. Just because someone's loss seems less significant does not mean you're not allowed to feel pain and discuss those feelings.”*

### Opening the Discussion about Grief and Loss

- **Grief is a common experience**

*“Most of us have experienced many types of losses during the pandemic including losses of people due to COVID-19 or other causes and life experiences that were very important to us.”*

*“Grief is a natural consequence of loss and can be shown in a variety of feelings, thoughts and behaviors”*

### Starter Questions

- **Background Questions**

*“What losses of significant people in your life have you experienced during the pandemic?”*

*“What other types of losses of the pandemic have been difficult for you ... missed experiences, loss of income, social isolation, health difficulties?”*

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- **Reaction Questions**

*"What has been the impact of your losses both at home and at work?"*

- **Coping Questions**

*"How have you been coping with your losses?"*

*"What strategies have you used to process your grief?"*

*"How has your family been coping?"*

*"What have you found most helpful?"*

*"What is still most challenging to you about your losses?"*

### **Keeping the focus**

*"That is an important issue but how does that relate to your grief during the pandemic?"*

*"You have been through many losses before the pandemic. How did that affect the way you coped with the losses of the pandemic?"*

### **Encourage More Sharing**

*"That must be difficult for you to share"*

*"I admire your bravery in sharing more about your losses"*

## **2. Keeping the Door Open**

*"What can I do to help you feel more secure/comfortable at work?"*

*"Would you like more support with your lessons or with students, especially those students in your classroom who may also be grieving?"*

*"Can I follow up with you next week?"*

*"I found our talk to be very helpful for me also"*

## **3. Helping Find Resources**

### **Identification of Additional Support Needs**

*"What do you think are some of the "take aways" or lessons learned from our discussion about losses because of the pandemic?"*

*"What areas do you think you would like to talk more about?"*

### **Increase Knowledge About Grief and Loss**

*"Can I help you find and link up with resources about grief and coping with loss?"*

*"Here is a list of /post to links to videos, articles or other resources including the Coalition to Support Grieving Students*

*www.grievingstudents.org that many have found particularly helpful."*

### **Referral**

*"Would you like my help in finding other people at our school who can help support you?"*

*"Would you like me to help you find names of grief experts or mental health professionals who can help you during this journey?"*

### **Group Discussion Suggestions**

If you would like to start a group discussion about experiences of grief and loss during the pandemic in your school, the individual conversations guidelines can be easily adapted. Group support can help school staff feel they are not alone because of the added opportunities for mutual support that can be available.

The following adaptations may be helpful in supporting the group discussion process.

### **Before starting the group**

- Ask all group members if they can commit to attend a certain number of group meetings (e.g., 1 meeting?, 6 meetings?) so there will be enough time for everyone to share
- Set a time for each group meeting which will be convenient for all participants (e.g., after school on Wednesdays for 30 minutes, lunch break on Tuesdays for 20 minutes)
- Agree on the amount of time available for each person (e.g., 2 – 5 minutes) to share during the meeting so that everyone will have an opportunity
- Agree on a group facilitator, or consider rotating who will facilitate from week to week

### **Role of the group facilitator**

1. Review the **"Starting the Conversation"** suggestions and then prompt participants with the **"Starter Questions"**
2. Share that it is okay if some participants prefer to listen and not share as this may be the way they have learned to best process their feelings
3. Remind participants that the most important task of all group members is to

actively listen and offer emotional support only during the sharing process

4. Save time at the end of each meeting for all group members to participate in **"Keeping the Door Open"** and review how each member can assist in **"Helping Find Resources"** if additional support will be helpful

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students created a free school practitioner-oriented website, <https://grievingstudents.org>, with over 20 video training modules on topics ranging from how to talk with grieving students to responding to a school crisis event. Endorsed by over one hundred professional organizations and free to download, the website provides module summaries, handouts, reference materials, and guidance documents that provide step-by-step practical advice. Free resources for parents and other caring adults are also available.



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