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Grief In Schools: Making Connections In The School and Community

Presenters:

- Michelle Halm, MA, M.Ed, CT
 - Jessica Johnston, LPC
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Buddy's Place, a program of Pillars

- Monthly Gatherings
 - 2nd Monday of every month
- 8 Week Sessions
 - Fall
 - Spring
- Consultation and Presentations
- The programs are facilitated by trained volunteers
- Located in Western Springs, IL
- Counseling through Pillars
- We are grateful for the contributions and gifts from individuals, faith organizations, foundations, clubs, organizations, and businesses.

Presenters

Michelle Halm, MA., M.Ed., CT

- Been a member of the Buddy's Place team for 7 years
- Holds a Certification in Thanatology (CT)
 - Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC)
- Grief Support Specialist Certificate
 - (University of Wisconsin – Madison)
- Certified School Counselor
- Former high school social studies teacher

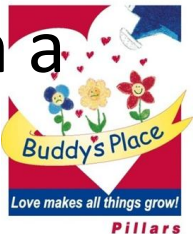
Jessica Johnston, LPC

- Certified School Counselor
- Facilitator for the programs offered at Buddy's Place
 - Children's group
 - Adult group
 - Monthly Gatherings

Grief In Schools: Making Connections In The School and Community

Grief can impact everyone in a school, from students and caregivers, to faculty and staff, to administration and even to the community at large.

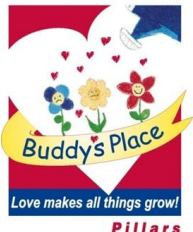
- We will identify what grief is and different types of grief.
- We will identify resources both within the school and in the community.
- Activities that can be used in the school and in a community setting will also be discussed.



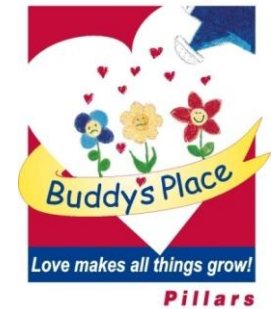
What is Grief

- Grief is a strong, sometimes overwhelming **emotion for people**, regardless of whether their sadness stems from the loss of a loved one or from a terminal diagnosis they or someone they love have received.
- They might find themselves feeling numb and removed from daily life, unable to carry on with regular duties while saddled with their sense of loss.
- **Grief is the natural reaction to loss. Grief is both a universal and a personal experience.** Individual experiences of grief vary and are influenced by the nature of the loss. Some examples of loss include the death of a loved one, the ending of an important relationship, job loss, loss through theft or the loss of independence through disability.
- Experts advise those grieving to realize they **can't control the process and to prepare for varying stages of grief.** Understanding why they're suffering can help, as can talking to others and trying to resolve issues that cause significant emotional pain, such as feeling guilty for a loved one's death.
- **Mourning can last for months or years.** Generally, pain is tempered as time passes and as the bereaved adapts to life without a loved one, to the news of a terminal diagnosis or to the realization that someone they love may die.
- If you're uncertain about whether your grieving process is normal, consult your health care professional. Outside help is sometimes beneficial to people trying to recover and adjust to a death or diagnosis of a terminal illness.

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/patient-visitor-guide/support-groups/what-is-grief>



Grief is a natural reaction following a death or a loss



- **Multidimensional/Manifestations**

- **Emotional** – disbelief, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, helplessness
- **Physical** – How our bodies feel (stiff neck/upset stomach/chest pain/headache)
- **Behavioral** – how we act: sleeping; eating; crying
- **Cognitive** – thinking: “why?” can’t focus or concentrate; confusion; disoriented
- **Spiritual** – questions about identity, meaning of life; not what we had planned; unfairness

- **What people feel and do**

- Grief must not be thought of as dreary and destructive.
- Grief (especially children’s grief) can be loud, resilient, healthy, powerful, vibrant

- **Grief spiral vs. stages –**

- it is a lifelong process; not a series of stages we move through and complete.

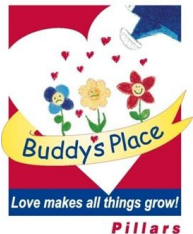


- **No right or wrong way-**

- like a snowflake or a fingerprint; grievers are our teachers.
- Within family, everyone grieves differently; learn to respect differences

Within each of us is the natural ability to heal

- A deep emotional wound
- Grief work cleanses the wound
- Factors that influence healing
 - Nature of death
 - Communication system
 - Perceived support
 - Coping skills already in place



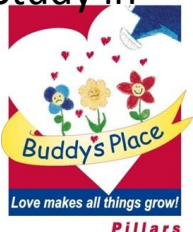
Common Types of Grief & Loss

- “Normal”
- Anticipatory**
- Complicated
- Chronic
- Collective/Cumulative
- Delayed
- Distorted
- Prolonged
- Exaggerated
- Masked

- Disenfranchised**
 - Ambiguous Loss
- Traumatic
- Inhibited
- Abbreviated
- Absent
- Secondary Losses**

Sources: www.whatsyourgrief.com

(**Persistent complex bereavement disorder** is in the chapter on Conditions for Further Study in the new DSM-5)



Why is understanding grief in children important or relevant?

- 1 in 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by age 18.
 - (Kenneth Doka, Editor of OMEGA, Journal of Death and Dying)
- In a poll of 1,000 high school juniors and seniors, 90% indicated that they had experienced the death of a loved one.
 - (nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/Mortality.pdf)
- *Grieving in Schools: Nationwide Survey among Classroom Teachers on Childhood Bereavement Conducted by New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers, 2012* Classroom teachers report that students who have lost a parent or guardian typically exhibit: -
 - Difficulty concentrating in class (observed by 87% of teachers) –
 - Withdrawal/disengagement and less class participation (observed by 82%) –
 - Absenteeism (observed by 72%) –
 - Decrease in quality of work (observed by 68%) –
 - Less reliability in turning in assignments (observed by 66%)
 - 7 in 10 teachers (69%) currently have at least one student in their class(es) who has lost a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend in the past year.

Divorce

- Half of all American children will witness the breakup of a parent's marriage.
 - Of these, close to half will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage.
 - https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FF-F-Guide/Children-and-Divorce-001.aspx
 - Resource: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/divorce>

Incarcerated Parents

- More than 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent. 1 in 28 children.
- <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/nrccfi-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>
 - Resource: <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/>

Principles and Challenges

Guiding Principles

- ❑ Grief is a natural reaction to loss for children as well as adults.
- ❑ Within each child and adult is the natural ability to heal their loss when given a safe, supportive environment.
- ❑ The duration and intensity of grief are unique for each individual.
- ❑ Caring and acceptance foster the healing process.

-adapted from The Dougy Center, Portland, Oregon

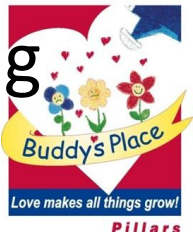
Five Challenges of a Grieving Child

1. Feeling safe in their world again
2. Understanding the death
3. Mourning the death
4. Staying connected with the person who died
5. Resuming childhood again

-From *Guiding Your Child Through Grief*: Emswiler, 2000

When Death Impacts Your School

1. Talk with the bereaved students before they return.
2. Talk to your class about how grief affects people and encourage them to share how they feel.
3. Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how they may be of help.
4. Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate and his or her family.
5. Provide flexibility and support to your grieving student upon his or her return to class



Suggested Do's and Don't for School Personnel

(depending on school policy)

Do...

- Have a school and district-wide crisis plan or plan for addressing deaths involving students, facility members, or higher profile people in the community.
- Attend the funeral or memorial service if possible (a representative from the school)
- Be mindful of using terms in class such as “this is mind-blowing,” “you are killing me,”
- Put a “thinking of you” box at the side of the classroom for students to write sympathy notes. Review them before giving to the family.
- Have a conversation with the student and/or family about deadline extensions and work modifications.
- It is fine to say...
 - “it is complicated. But what I do know is that we love/are thinking of ____.”
 - “Thanks for asking, but I don’t feel like talking about this right now.”
 - “ _____ died suddenly at home.”

• *Supporting Children After a Suicide Loss – A Guide for Parents and Caregivers. Chesapeake Life Center*

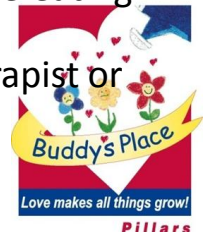
Do NOT...

- Assume that the student needs to be out of the room for certain sensitive activities. Kids want to feel normal, and if you have any concerns, address them in private.
- Avoid the student. Show the same attention and concern you would if the loved one died any other way.
- Seek the student out in public areas, like hallways to express your condolences
- Say things such as, “It was their time,” or “God wanted them more than you do” or “That is what addition/_____ will do.” Though perhaps well intentioned, these phrases can be confusing and hurtful.
- Be afraid to contact organizations, community agencies or other resources for assistance and information.

DON'TS IN HELPING PEOPLE THROUGH GRIEF

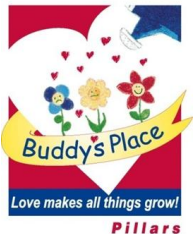
Do NOT...

- Make judgments – Words such as:
 - “Be strong”
 - “Now you will need to take care of your family”
 - “You cannot change the past – you need to get on with your life”
- Assume that adolescents “naturally” have a supportive family who will remain available to them. In the crisis of sudden loss, adults are often overwhelmed by their own grief and children may become “the forgotten and silent mourners.”
- Assume that teenagers will find comfort in friends. If friends have not experienced personal losses themselves, they are frequently unable to “connect” with those in mourning. Support groups for teens who have suffered losses are an excellent vehicle for the safe expression of their emotions.
- Assume they heard you the first time. All people in grief need constant support and reassurance that they will be OK, and that the feelings they are experiencing *are not permanent*. Grief is a process.
- Try to “fix it.” Offering “quick” solutions can convince a young person that you do not understand and intensify their feeling of isolation. The pain of loss and separation is serious. It must be lived through and worked through. It cannot be fixed.
- Try to cheer them up. Adolescents intuitively know when a person is safe to talk to. Attempts at cheering them up gives the teen the message “you need to be OK, even if you’re not.” Grief with no outlet may go underground. Once there, it may build and over time, show itself in self-defeating or self-destructive behaviors.
- Place the child in the role of total support to a parent or caregiver, or as their surrogate therapist or confidante.



What is said matters and How it is said

- Person first language
 - John is a person **with** a mental illness vs. John **is** mentally ill. (Noun vs. adjective)
- Direct language
 - Died vs. loss or passed
- Cause is different than the means
 - Depression is the cause, suicide is the means
 - Cancer is the cause most often another factor is the means for the death (heart, illness)
- Responses
 - I'm sorry__ - period (.) vs. comma (,)
 - I'm sorry, _____ (conversation) vs. I'm sorry. (mourner has to be comforter).
 - Alternatives and use conversation bridges, not shift in conversation power.
 - I'm saddened...
 - I cannot imagine, how are you?
 - What do you miss the most
 - Tell me about your ____ (person)_____
 - How are you TODAY vs. How are you? (specific vs. general)
 - Be genuine.



Communication Guidelines

1. Communication with children always begins and ends with honesty and availability.
2. Talk at the person's (child's) level- physically & cognitively.
3. Allow the child to guide your conversations and teach you their needs.
4. Learn to be available to sit and be silent with a child.
5. Encourage opportunities for children to express themselves.
6. Use all creative (verbal and nonverbal) means in trying to enable a child to communicate.
7. What we do is never as important as how we do it.



DESTRUCTIVE vs. HEALTHY ORIENTATIONS

The 3 DESTRUCTIVE ORIENTATIONS

Identification Orientation

- Often referred to as the “*I know exactly how you feel*” orientation, this approach includes the adult identifying her own loss with the child’s, and projecting her own experience of loss onto the child.

Sympathetic Orientation

Feeling sorry for children who are experiencing losses will not help them. *Empowering* them will. “I feel sorry for Johnny...” or “The poor child lost his...”. A child who is pitied receives reinforcement for a negative self-image. Inherent in the sympathetic orientation is the underlying message that there is something wrong with the child. “I’m different.” “You think I can’t handle this.”

Abandonment Orientation

- In this orientation, there can be both *literal* (no mention of the loss at all) and *emotional abandonment*. (“Have you looked outside and seen what a beautiful day it is! Come on, cheer up, you shouldn’t be sad anymore – it doesn’t change anything.”) In an effort to protect children (and themselves) from the pain of separation and death, parents and others may choose to avoid any discussion of the loss. Thus, a code of silence is established.

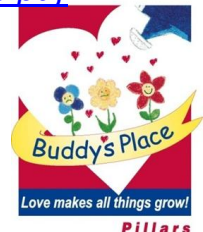
HEALTHY ORIENTATION

Empathic Healing

- Empathic Healing is the healthy, therapeutic orientation. In Empathic Healing, children are told that they are the adult’s teacher. Only they know how they feel and what they think. *An honest, trusting and supportive environment is created so that the child feels safe enough to share his feelings openly. The adult actively listens to the child’s story.* He role models for the child healthy ways to express feelings and communicate needs. He encourages and reinforces the child’s expression of grief, offering validation to the child that his feelings are normal.

Administration

- Have a crisis plan that is ready to be implemented.
 - Could include...
 - Some school have partnerships with other schools to cover their classes, case loads for a few days. The substitutes cover, the covering teachers/staff.
 - Grade below teachers move up to cover.
 - Pre-determined press contact/school spokesperson. Who is going to be liaison with family?
 - Does not disclosed any HIPPA/FERPA information
 - Staff briefing meeting
 - Student body briefing – do not announce in an assembly or over PA
 - Established policy on memorials
 - <https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/.../Handouts/.../WS1H21.Memorials.pdf>
 - List of resources for community, faculty and staff



Resources in the school and community at large

Schools

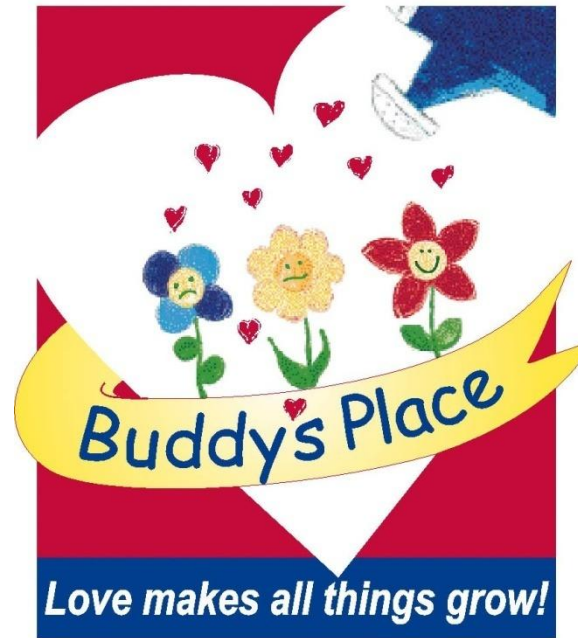
- Presentations to staff and/or school community
 - Professional development
 - Department presentations
- Have books available in school and public library
 - Can find listings on Pinterest
 - <http://barrharris.org/for-professionals/bibliography-on-bereavement/>
 - email buddysplace@pillarscommunity.org for a list of books
- Safe space to go to when needed
- Grief groups
 - Counselor/Social Worker
 - Rainbows program
 - <https://rainbows.org/> (covers all types of losses)

Community at Large

- Local grief/bereavement support programs
- Support groups
- Professionals who work with grieving clients

Community showing support

- Consult with the family or their “spokesperson”
- How long do they want visible signs to remain/do they want community involvement?
 - Ribbons around trees
 - Temporary memorial
 - fundraiser



Pillars

Buddy's Place, a program of Pillars

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