

Mini-Articles: Impact on Learning

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For Grieving Students: Keep Academic Challenges from Becoming Academic Failures

A common reaction to grief is difficulty concentrating. Grieving children and teens usually find it hard to remember new facts or master new concepts.

Educators should anticipate these sorts of academic challenges for grieving students. Teachers and other staff can modify lessons in ways that are tremendously helpful. This might include changing the focus of an assignment, coming up with a different way to complete an assignment or postponing a due date.

It's important to offer academic support proactively. You don't need to wait for a grieving student to begin demonstrating academic challenges. Early support from teachers and schools can prevent academic challenges from becoming academic failures.

Learn more about the impact of grief on learning and ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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Difficulty Concentrating: A Hallmark of Grief

Difficulty with concentration and learning are extremely common for people dealing with grief. This is true for adults as well as children. However, because learning is the *main* work of school-aged children and teens, these common challenges pose a risk for more serious academic problems.

As one grieving student explained, "It was hard because I couldn't concentrate on my work. If I was reading, I would read the words, but I wouldn't read the story. I would think about something else and I couldn't concentrate."

This reflects many of the typical experiences for grieving students. They are usually easily distracted. They have more difficulty learning new facts or concepts. Preexisting learning challenges often become worse.

The goal for educators is to find a balance between maintaining reasonable expectations and providing the support and accommodation students need. Educators can talk directly with students to identify the level of academic work that feels appropriate and achievable. It's also a good idea to talk with families to learn more about how the student is adjusting at home.

Three steps educators can take to modify learning activities for grieving students include:

1. *Change an assignment.* This can include changing a due date or changing the format (for example, writing a personal essay instead of giving an oral presentation to the class). It might mean allowing a student to work with a partner instead of alone.
2. *Change the focus or timing of a lesson.* Sometimes the content of a lesson can pose problems. A literature class might choose a different book to discuss if the one originally scheduled describes a death similar to the one a student is currently grieving. A health class might postpone the unit on substance abuse until later in the year if a student has just lost a sibling to a drug overdose.
3. *Reschedule or adapt tests.* Tests create considerable pressure for a grieving student who is unable to concentrate. Immediately after a death, such students might be exempted from a test. They might be able to delay a test or take a test without the usual time limit. Test scores might be weighted less in determining final grades.

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Anticipate Challenges to Learning Among Grieving Students

It is common for children and teens to experience academic challenges after the death of a family member or close friend. Educators should expect this. Lessons and assignments can be adapted in ways that help students cope more successfully.

These effort provide support for both the grief process generally and any struggles a student may be having with learning. By offering this support proactively, educators can help prevent academic challenges from becoming academic failures.

Typical experiences for grieving students include:

- Difficulty concentrating and distractibility
- Difficulty remembering new facts and concepts
- Anxiety, sadness and trouble sleeping—all of which contribute further to learning difficulties

Some of the modifications teachers have found helpful in their work with grieving students include:

- Being flexible with due dates and accepting late assignments
- Offering to help a student complete an assignment
- Providing alternatives for a written or timed test (testing at a later time, testing in a private setting, testing without a time limit, doing a different kind of assignment altogether)
- Allowing a student to work with a partner rather than solo
- Adapting an assignment so it is more engaging for the student (for example, instead of a formal research paper, offering the option of completing an oral history project)

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](#), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.