

How Higher Education Faculty and Staff Can Support Newly Bereaved People



The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for higher education faculty and staff when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Higher Education Professionals Can Make All the Difference

Higher education professionals and institutions may interact with grieving families, classmates, and friends, including students who were matriculating into your institution. Upwards of 30 percent of students enrolled in higher education report being within two years of losing a close friend or family member, yet less than 1 percent of higher education institutions have student-specific bereavement policies.^{1,2}

Empirical data show that grief and bereavement have profound effects on higher education students, including impacts in the physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal domains. When comparing bereaved students of higher education to their non-grieving peers, experiencing a loss is connected to lower overall GPAs during the semester of loss, poorer exam performance, decreased support, decreased sense of belonging, prolonged assignment completion timelines, increased isolation, and difficulty concentrating.

The sensitivity and care that higher education personnel provide when interacting with families can have a profound impact on how bereaved families and students cope in the short- and long-term.

Practical Tips

- 1. Institute straightforward institution-wide policies.** Higher education institutions are faced with complicated decision-making, such as whether to require proof of death or how to assist the student when absences or delayed coursework are inevitable. Adopting clear policies and practices can help set expectations and guidelines for students, faculty, and staff.
- 2. Encourage collaboration and coordination across departments.** Coordination and communication between academic advisors, deans' offices, the registrar, student life, and human resources can ease the administrative burdens for newly bereaved students and employees.
- 3. Convey compassion.** Listen, be kind, and patient.
- 4. Know the signs.** Grief often manifests as changes in sleep patterns, changes in appetite, loss of interest in hobbies, loss of motivation or focus, significant and sudden shifts in mood, and social isolation. These behaviors can negatively impact attendance and academic performance and may result in school withdrawal or expulsion. With permission from the student, inform all instructors and staff to be observant and reach out to the administration if they notice the student struggling academically or socially.
- 5. Recognize that grief impacts cognitive functions.** It is not uncommon for grieving students to struggle with retaining information and understanding complex concepts. Strategies such as allowing for extra time for test taking or open-book tests and quizzes may be helpful.

¹ Cousins, C., Servaty-Seib, H. L., & Lockman, J. (2017). College student adjustment and coping: Bereaved and nonbereaved students. *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*, 74(4), 386-409. doi: 10.1177/0030222815598911.

² Servaty-Seib, H. L., & Liew, C. H. (2019). Advocating for bereavement leave policies for college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(2), 240-244.

6. **Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process. Refrain from using expressions such as “God only gives you what you can handle” or “Your child is safely in God’s arms now.”
7. **Provide a list of resources.** Even in the absence of a student-specific bereavement policy, many institutions offer resources for crisis mitigation, mental health, and academic support for students impacted by the death of another student or sibling. Ensure the campus directory contains resources for counseling services, academic success, tutoring centers, and crisis hotlines.

When a student has died, here are a few tips for higher education institutions:

1. **Use sensitivity when managing the student’s belongings.** One of the most difficult and painful experiences for parents and caregivers is retrieving their child’s belongings. Asking parents or caregivers how and when they would like to receive those belongings is an important first step.
2. **Exercise compassion regarding billing.** Determine whether and how you will bill the family for the services and education. Consider releasing the family from prior and future billing.
3. **Discuss graduation and other important events.** Talk to the family about how to honor or recognize the student during school events, such as annual remembrance ceremonies and graduation.
4. **Consider sending written condolences to the family or caregivers.** Families appreciate support from the institutions that served their children.
5. **Cease all financial communication.** Remove the family and caregivers from all correspondence (calls, emails, and flyers) from the financial aid office, the registrar, the athletic department for current or prospective student athletes, and student life. If the institution establishes a scholarship or related commemoration program, ask the family if they would like to receive related communications.
6. **Host an annual remembrance service.** Honoring the losses students experience validates their relationships, grief, and the person who has died. Be flexible when offering a remembrance service so the bereaved family can engage as little or as much as they want in the event.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved parents and families. Here are a few more tips:

- **How many children do you have?** One of the most difficult questions a newly bereaved parent or caregiver will be asked is, “How many children do you have?” There is no right answer, but be prepared for them to include all of their children, whether living or dead.
- **Simple questions can be hurtful.** Common questions like, “How are you doing?” can be reframed as, “How are you coping?” to acknowledge how challenging losing a child is.
- **There are no stages of grief.** The stages of grief are a common misconception.
- **Don’t ask how the child died.** What’s important is that the child died, not how they died. Asking how they died may lead parents or caregivers to relive the most painful experience of their life.
- **Grief will last a long time.** Bereaved parents and caregivers will not be “feeling better” in a few weeks or even in a year. It takes many years to adjust to such profound loss; their lives are forever changed.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text **988** to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** offers information on coping with bereavement and grief, visit samhsa.gov/communities/coping-bereavement-grief.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. Evermore offers a toolkit for higher education institutions interested in establishing bereavement leave policies for students. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory.