Having your child lose someone that they love or care deeply about is very painful. They may experience a number of difficult emotions, and it may feel like the pain and sadness that they are experiencing will never let up. These are normal reactions to loss. While there is no right or wrong way to grieve and work through these feelings, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can allow them to move forward. Below are a few resources that may be beneficial to helping them work through their loss.

**Pathways Center for Grief & Loss**
4075 Old Harrisburg Pike, Mount Joy PA 17552
717-391-2413 or 1800-924-7610

Pathways provide Bereavement Counseling in several formats specifically related to the death of a loved one. The first step would be for a Custodial Parent or Guardian to call for an individual assessment to determine the services that would best fit the needs of your child. The servers could be one of the following:

- **Individual Consultation** - The staff would explore the needs of the child and recommend services. This may include referral for individual counseling outside of the agency.
- **Family Support: Coping Kids and Teens** - Teens from ages 4-18 years and their parents participate in an eight week series. During the first session counselors will meet with you and your child to discuss if the group is the best fit for your family. If it is not, they will help you explore other community resources.
- **Camp Mend A Heart** - One day family camp for children and teens (ages 6-18) and their parents who are grieving a loved one.

There is no fee for most services provided by Pathways, due to the generous support from the community. There is a small registration fee for the camps.

**EHS Counseling Website**
Under the Grief Support Materials link, you will find numerous print resources related to death and the grief process.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact your child’s school counselor @ 721-1478.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mr. Habowski</th>
<th>Last Name A-Di / Gifted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Batdorf</td>
<td>Last Names Dj-Ko / Emotional Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Davies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Schober</td>
<td>Last Names Rok-Z /Life Skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH

This is a general guideline in reference to the differences between ages and stages of how children understand death. Any child may move earlier into a stage or be "frozen" in an earlier stage.

UNDER 3 (preverbal)
-no language to attach to thoughts/experience -- greatest need is for immediate bonding to new support.

AGES 3 - 6 (magical thinking)
-may believe s/he caused the death by magic.
-associate death w/ concurrent events/places. (G'ma died in hospital, so everyone who goes into the hospital will die there.)
-experience grief in heavy but brief spurts.
-denies death as final process (Mom will come back for my birthday).
-often forgets person has died.
-fears loss and abandonment by remaining parent.
-sees death as change in state or gradual process (a leaf may be "more dead" than a toaster).
-usually have few fears about pain/distress for the deceased.
-may not be open to reason or fact about cause of death -- at this age they often "determine" facts for themselves.
-see death as caused by external forces (retaliation, strife).

AGES 6 - 9 (concrete reasoning)
-tend to personify death (death dropper, angel of death).
-superstitious, lots of ghost stories (chants, oaths).
-associate death w/ non-movement (the dead can't talk, move, walk).
-begin to explore concepts of death relative to family ("Some day my mom will die.").
-may experience sadness in anticipation of deaths which are not "rationally" imminent.
-believe it will happen to others, not themselves.
-are moving away from magical thinking toward grasping concepts of finality and irreversibility.
-around 6, may have fascination w/ death, killing.
-around 8, may have morbid fascination w/ death rituals, also dreams of death and resurrection.
-material facts around death may seem funny.

AGES 9 - 12 (abstract thinking)
-more realistic sense of death -- often pervasive fear of it.
-feel death is sudden and unpredictable, fear of painful death, poisoning, falling.
-begin to realize universality of death.
-fear of "the void" following death -- inanimate suspension.
-fascination with the physiology -- want to view body, ask "intrusive" or insensitive questions

ADOLESCENCE
-grow increasingly closer to adult views, experiences.
-can begin to be philosophical in viewing death.
-may idealize the deceased, especially if a friend, sibling or parent.
-may experience conflict of needing to be growing independent (appropriate for developmental stage) while needing family support during crisis/grief.
-greatest fears are of separation and non-existence.
COMMON GRIEF RESPONSES . . .
SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALING

We experience grief any time we are separated from someone or something that is important to us. Grief over the death of a loved one is as natural a response as breathing. Though it is a natural process, it can sometimes leave us feeling quite overwhelmed by many feelings. The following are normal, natural responses that you may experience:

• Intense sadness and crying at unexpected times
• Numbness, as though the death didn’t really occur
• Increased irritability
• Lack of concentration – inability to follow through on routine tasks
• Difficulty sleeping – dreams of the deceased
• Anger at your loved one for leaving you
• Anger around the situation of the death
• Appetite changes – increased appetite or marked decrease in appetite resulting in weight changes
• Guilt or anger over things that happened or didn’t happen in the relationship
• Sadness over lost hopes and dreams
• Sensing the presence of your loved one – through sight, sound, scent or taste
• Dramatic mood changes over the slightest things
• Physical discomfort such as emptiness in your chest, lump in your throat, neck tension
• Exhaustion or feelings of fatigue
• A strong desire to talk with your loved one

(over)
Though a natural process, grief can be very unpredictable. With no clear stages to mark your progress and no neat instructions to follow, your journey through grief can feel unlike anything you’ve experienced before. These suggestions may help you cope with your grief – one day at a time. Remember that everyone’s grief experience is unique. Your relationship with your loved one is like no other, so don’t compare your grief with others. In your own time, in your own way, you will move through your grief. Review the following ideas. Do what works for you. Disregard what doesn’t work and add your own ideas.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALING FROM LOSS**

- Know and accept that your functioning won’t be up to par.
- Take one day at a time – the grief process unfolds, as it needs to if we don’t try to control it.
- Acknowledge emotions as they arise – allow yourself plenty of time for crying and plenty of time for talking.
- Remember that anger is a powerful emotion and needs to be released – all of your feelings are valid and need to be acknowledged and expressed.
- Be gentle with yourself – give up self-criticism.
- Keep a journal – writing is another form of expression.
- Pamper yourself.
- Join a support group – call a hospice, church, mental health agency or counselor.
- Trust your own sense of timing – grief is a process, not an event.
- Exercise daily – get outdoors and breathe the fresh air.
- Participate in pleasantly distracting activities – gardening, movies, reading, television, and museums.
- Give yourself permission to have fun.
PATHWAYS CENTER
for GRIEF & LOSS

COPING WITH SUDDEN DEATH

If you experience the sudden, unexpected death of someone you knew, cared for, or loved, your reactions may seem intense and overwhelming. Some people feel as though they might “fall apart,” and worry about the possible loss of control of their own reactions. Others may feel numb and barely functioning. You probably have nothing you can compare this experience to, and that can be scary. Part of what is difficult about this death is that you didn’t expect it to happen, and certainly not this way. So of course you feel unable to cope.

Know that your reactions are normal; it is the situation that is unusual. Take some time to look honestly at what you need, and how to meet those needs. Despite others who want to support and be around you, you may need some time alone. Know that you will experience a wide variety of reactions, even throughout the course of one day. This affects you in all ways—physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually. By looking at how you are affected, you will understand how you can cope and survive this difficult time in your life.

- **Physical** - The way you learned of the sudden death may affect you physically. Many say they feel as though they have “just undergone surgery without anesthesia.” Most people have trouble sleeping and may sleep for only two to three hours at a time. Initially, nightmares or bad dreams are common. Many feel exhausted. In the best way it can, your body is telling you that you have been significantly affected.

- **Emotional** - The emotional aspect of your reactions is often what you - and others - are aware of. This isn’t just your tears, it may be your inability to cry. Other strong feelings you may experience include: fear, vulnerability, guilt, or rage. Finding outlets for intense emotions is important. Decide whom you feel safest with to “let loose” and express all that you are feeling. Remind yourself that you cannot control everything and that often; your expectations for you or others may be unrealistic.

- **Cognitive** - Perhaps you keep thinking, “It can’t be true, how can this have happened?” It is natural to replay details over and again in your mind. You are trying to understand something that doesn’t make sense. Know that you may:
  - Have difficulty concentrating
  - Be forgetful
  - Worry you are “going crazy”
  - Have many questions
  - Revisit what you could or should have said or done differently

As you realize that perhaps the worst that could ever happen has happened, you may also wonder what else could happen. Remind yourself how unique and unusual this situation is; give yourself a dose of reality or ask for reassurance from someone you trust. Eventually your questions will change from “Why and how did this happen?” to “How will I cope?” It’s important to ask those questions, and you may have to for a longtime.

(over)
• **Social** – When a death occurs suddenly, it seems as though the world has gone on but your life has come to a halt. You may sense others feel uncomfortable around you or even avoid contact with you. Conversations can be awkward and brief. Some people, out of their own need or discomfort, end up telling you about something similar that happened to them - even though you’re the one who’s hurting! Others may imply you need to “get out around others and keep busy” or “move on.” Do what you feel you need to do. Don’t base your plans or decisions on others’ opinions. Base your decisions on what seems right for you at this time.

• **Spiritual** – Particularly after a sudden, unexpected death, even very “religious” people reassess what they believe and why. What has happened may contradict what you thought you knew about what is fair and just in the world. Many find their faith deepened, but this only happened after a period of intense questioning. Eventually, you may realize that you are able to go on despite not having all the answers.

For people grieving a sudden, unexpected death, it can take longer to grieve and mourn than it will for someone grieving an expected death. After a sudden death some say what helps most are finding ways in which to honor and remember them. In time, as you adjust to the changes brought about by the loss, your attention will turn to what you want to remember. Your hurt will lessen as you discover and begin to focus on what is healing for you.

Meeting with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful as you realize that many of the reactions, questions, and feelings you have are not unique. You can learn what worked for others and find affirmation and encouragement. Although grief is an individual experience, those who have been there are often the best teachers for those living through the experience. Call a Pathways Center for Grief & Loss counselor to learn more about the support available to you.
SUDDEN DEATH IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION

Everyone reacts differently when a sudden death occurs. How one responds depends on the relationship to the deceased, their personality, previous experience with death, developmental stage, concurrent stressors, and the environment they are in when coping with the loss. Feelings of shock, unreality and confusion are common. When life feels suddenly “out of control,” it is important to convey a sense of predictability and order to provide reassurance and a sense of security. There are three segments of support in the school community—administrative support of staff, staff support of students, and staff and administrative support of parents. All three are important components to consider when restoring a sense of order.

Students are impacted in many ways when a sudden death occurs -- emotionally, behaviorally, socially, and academically. Although concerned, many parents tend to discourage rather than encourage students to express their true feelings, particularly when those feelings include anger, guilt or blame. At home, children will also be aware when adults are affected by a loss. They sense their vulnerability and will intuitively hold back, often finding it difficult to express how they are feeling to the adults around them. For these reasons, school may be the most safe and secure environment for students adjusting to the impact of a loss.

If a traumatic event has occurred to students or faculty, responses of shock, numbness and unreality can follow for several days after the incident. Be prepared for unexpected or exaggerated reactions. It is common to hear countless “why” questions and the need to talk about and retell the details over and over again. Assess and separate those who are most directly affected, and prioritize how to best meet the needs of these individuals.

How To Help

In times of crisis, the goal in providing support is to convey information, provide structure, and offer a safe place to articulate questions and concerns. Students, faculty, and parents need the opportunity to process, in different ways, how the death has affected them. In providing support, consider the “Three C’s”:

Calm presence--your ability to maintain a non-anxious presence will inspire it in others

Concrete information--this will dispel rumors and help others feel less anxious as they obtain factual information

Course of action—this provides a sense of control to offset feeling Overwhelmed

(over)
• **Younger children** will not be able to express how they are feeling through words; they cannot grasp the permanence of death. Painting, drawing, journals, story time, and playtime can be safe and helpful opportunities for them to convey fears, questions, and feelings. Many children will embrace an opportunity to talk, and will raise questions such as “What happens when someone dies?” or “Why is life unfair?” Worries, confusion about death, intense feelings of anger, and deep sadness readily come forth in group discussions if they are given the opportunity to talk with other children who have similar concerns.

• **Teenagers** more clearly understand the permanence of death. Despite experiencing a significant loss and the worry about losing someone else they care about, many will still believe death could never happen to them personally. Parents often make the mistake of expecting teenagers to “be strong” when they are actually feeling very vulnerable. Opportunities to write and group discussions can air feelings about loss and death, explore effective as well as ineffective ways of coping, and help adolescents sort through their confusion and pain. Teens are often more likely to share with their peers than they are with other adults.

• **School faculty and parents** who are grieving must be mindful of their own needs as they continue to support and address students’ needs. Grief is a long process, and adults will be most effective in providing support if they are also aware of how the loss is affecting them. Identifying what they need, obtaining their own support, adjusting in the work schedule—all will need attention when coping with a sudden, unexpected death.

As an adult, recognize that children and adolescents will -- and can -- only express how they are affected by a death if they are ready to do so. All too often, out of love and concern, adults tend to “push” a child or teen into individual counseling or group support, which only serves to aggravate an already emotionally stressful situation. For those who feel safe, if they are given the opportunity, significant growth and insight often occurs with minimal adult involvement or intervention, when a student is ready. PATHways Center for Grief & Loss is a resource that can help you identify what might be most helpful to you, your students, or your school.
Any of these signs may be present in initially in grief... pay attention if these persist over time. If you are concerned about a child, talk with the school counselor and parents to see if they are seeing the same signs. Try not to over state your case. Most parents will welcome the honest observations and concern. It is helpful to have a list of resources for them, should they concur and wish to seek professional help.

**Physical Signs:**
- Changes in eating (less or more)
- Changes in sleep (less or more)
- Significant loss of energy
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Stomach Aches

**Emotional Signs:**
- Persistent anxiety
- Hopes of reunion with deceased
- Desire to die
- Clinging to others
- Absence of all grief
- Strong resistance to forming new attachments

**Cognitive Signs:**
- Inability to concentrate
- Confused or distorted thinking
- Expression of only negative or only positive about the deceased

**Behavioral Signs:**
- Aggression, displays of power
- Withdrawn, regression
- Overachieving syndrome
- Inability to focus, concentrate
- Self destructive
- Excessive daydreaming
- Compulsive care-giving
- Accident-prone
- Stealing, other illegal activities
- Use/abuse of drugs/alcohol
- Unable to speak of the deceased

Any signs of long-term or clinical depression are red flags, as are your own "gut feelings" about whether a child is really struggling with more than just the profound sadness which typifies "normal" grief.
WHAT STUDENTS NEED IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY

• **Honest answers:** There is no way to begin to grieve without understanding how someone died or what the reality of the situation is...consider how differently you feel if a loved one is killed in an unavoidable accident or a reckless incident or an intentionally perpetrated act or a suicide. Our grief is dependent upon the circumstances of the loss, and the only information to ever give children is the truth. The only variable in that element is the amount of detail. It is not necessary to give gory or frightening details. But if there is information you are choosing to withhold, be honest about that. This is respectful of their integrity and the only way to maintain trust.

• **Reality checks:** The reality will sink in at different rates for different children. Because of denial, a common initial response to tragedy, it will be necessary for adults to repeat details of the event until the children really grasp it.

• **A variety of ways to do memory work:** Some students will want to talk about their favorite memories of the person who has died. Some will do better drawing pictures, doing collages or writing a letter to the family. One suggestion in either leading classroom discussion on this or encouraging writing/art is to suggest that they focus on their regrets and appreciations about this person. With younger children choose simpler words or define the meanings of regret and appreciation. This is an essential part of grief work.

• **A means to say good-bye:** We grieve in the environment of the loss... that means that the children may not be able to go home and process the loss with parents, who didn’t know the deceased in the context of the school in the way the student did. For youth to really mend from the loss, the school needs to facilitate a means for youth to have a period of grieving as well as having a time when that formal grieving time is over. Reminisce, say good-bye, and get on with life. This may be a simple as a tree planting or as organized a memory activity for the school. See the section on memory activities. Remember that doing this is the statement that the community of the school as a whole is done with the formal period of grieving, but that this in no way suggests that individuals are over their grief.

• **Reassurance:** The younger the student, the more there may be need for reassurance. When one person dies, it is not uncommon for children to generalize and fear that other special people will die in the same way. We cannot promise children that another person won’t die, but it is reassuring to point out that it makes sense to us that they might have that fear, but that we don’t expect this kind of death to happen again soon to anyone we know. Of course, if the death
is one in which you anticipate other deaths to follow, you would be honest about that. All reassurances must be honest and without promises of things over which we have no control.

- **No comparisons:** It is not helpful to idealize the person who has died. If students (or staff!) are painting the deceased as a superhuman angel of some sort, it is helpful to point out that s/he was just human like the rest of us, with strengths and weaknesses. Help them realize that making someone else sound perfect isn’t what makes us miss them... it is the love and caring that was shared that brings about the pain of grief when we lose someone special.

- **To continue to be... just who they were before!** Often a family will redefine a child’s role when someone dies -- if a father dies it is important not to expect the oldest son to be the man of the house. He is still just the oldest son. The child may have more work to do at home, but he is still just a child, and needs the support and room to be so. Watch that this general caution is also respected at school, and that we don’t lay additional expectations of grieving students, but instead that we support them in their grief.

- **Opportunities to move in and out of the grief process:** Children move in and out of grieving, sometimes rather quickly with many transitions in a single day. When they are playing and laughing, it is not disrespectful -- it is a healthy reprieve, though temporary, from the pain of the loss. Encourage them to go outside for recess and enjoy the parts of life they can... and be there to support them when they move back into the tears and sadness.

- **To know that they don’t have to protect you:** Children often choose their words carefully if they think that what they are saying might make you cry -- they think that their words are adding to your grief. They don’t understand that they are just providing you an opportunity to let out a few of the tears you already had inside you. Model for them that sadness and tears are a part of grief and that there is nothing they might have to say or to ask that you want them to withhold.

- **To be included:** So any memorial activity you plan will be more effective for them if they feel some sense of ownership. Ask them for their ideas of what a most fitting tribute might be. If you are aware that a student who has experienced a family death is not being included in the planning of the family memorial service or funeral, and if you know the parents well enough to do so, consider suggesting to them that they include the children in the planning.

- **For you to do your own grief work:** If you are stuffing down your unresolved grief, it is awfully difficult not to be giving children nonverbal messages that we’d rather they didn’t talk about the tough stuff. Realize that the more of your own grief work you’ve done, the better you’ll be at supporting them in theirs.

- **For you to have faith in their ability to cope and to be patient with them!** Remember that they may have trouble concentrating on school work for awhile.