

In 15-Minute Focus: *Grief and Bereavement*, Dave Opalewski offers school counselors and educators a primer on how to handle the death of a student or staff member.

No matter if the death was sudden or the result of a long illness, it can devastate an entire school family and its surrounding community. Students are impacted every time they walk into a classroom and see a classmate's empty desk or a substitute teacher sitting at a deceased teacher's desk. When tragedies like this occur, schools must respond quickly and offer what grieving students and staff need most—comfort. In this book, Opalewski gives schools a guide for addressing the death of a student or staff member, including what to say and what not to say to students along with helpful communication and intervention strategies for school counselors, educators, and administrators.

What you'll get:

- Learning the concepts and implementation process of "comfort before counseling"
- Grief research and data for children and adolescents
- Grief support group setup
- Activities to help students process grief, classroom activities, tips for parents, and more!

No school can truly prepare for the death of a student or staff member. A loss like this will shake the school family. But this book will give counselors and educators the information they need to respond to tragedy with understanding and comfort so that they can help students and staff work through their grief in a positive and productive way.



David Opalewski, M.A. is the founder and president of Grief Recovery, Inc., in Saginaw, Michigan. He is an author, consultant, and a widely sought-after conference speaker and trainer for the tragedy component of school crisis teams across the country.

David has a forty-four-year career in education. He has taught at the elementary, middle, high school, and college levels and was an at-risk counselor for eight of those years. During Opalewski's educational career, he experienced the combined deaths of twenty-six students and fellow staff members. He was a replacement teacher in a fifth-grade classroom for a teacher who was killed in an auto accident during the middle of the school year.

He retired from Central Michigan University in May of 2017 as Professor Emeritus. David worked part time for three years in a funeral home as an aftercare consultant to the families of the deceased.

Working alongside experts in various fields of mental health, the 15-Minute Focus series is designed to home in on a specific mental health topic, signs to look for, practical intervention and classroom management strategies, and effective ways to communicate and collaborate with internal staff, outside referrals, and student families.



P.O. Box 22185
Chattanooga, TN 37422-2185
423.899.5714 • 866.318.6294
fax: 423.899.4547 • www.ncyi.org



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Introduction

Imagine this situation. You arrive at school one morning to hear that one of your students died in a car accident on the way to school. Then you find out it was a student in your first period class. You think about how friendly and outgoing she was. How she was always upbeat and involved. In a few minutes you will have to face her classmates and deliver the bad news. What will you say to them? Will you carry on with a "normal" day of lessons, communicating to your students that "life goes on"? Or, will you face this difficulty by demonstrating honesty and compassion for both the deceased student and her classmates? If you have experienced such a crisis, you know just how painful this can be.

Perhaps the most valuable response to crisis is the ability to make ourselves do the things we have to do when they ought to be done, whether we like it or not. The death of a student or staff member can devastate a school and its surrounding community. When such a tragedy touches a school community, it is a school family issue, not just a counseling department issue.

Research and my experience prove that the number one need of the students and staff at this time is comfort. Shortly after the incident, shock, fear, and anxiety usually set in. People must come to normalization before quality cognitive processes can take place. Counseling is a cognitive process. If normalization does not first happen, the people being counseled cannot "connect the dots."

Research by The National Institute of Trauma and Loss in Children suggests that comfort brings normalization, thus, I developed the motto "comfort before counseling" as a best practice.¹ In an informal survey Dr. Joel Robertson and I conducted in 1994, surveying thousands of students in several states, we found that 79 percent of students wish to be comforted by their classroom teacher after a tragedy touches a school community.² The primary reasoning on their part is that they see their teacher every day at school and have an established relationship with that teacher. Students, for the most part, only occasionally speak with the school counselor. An overwhelming 86 percent of students also stated that they would rather not speak with a stranger about a painful event such as an unexpected school tragedy. Thus, the practice of bringing in counselors unfamiliar to students is not as effective a practice as it may seem. These outside counselors do not have

relationships with the students and are only around for a day or two. When they leave the school, it is assumed the school environment is “back to normal.” I am not asking classroom teachers to be counselors. I am asking them to be comforters so school counselors are in a better position to do the job of counseling.

At a conference a few years back, I met a married couple who had a first grader and kindergartener who were both students at Newtown when the terrible tragedy occurred there. Their first grader was killed, and their kindergartener survived the shooting. They shared with me that there was an outpouring of support from mental health professionals and organizations around the country. One group, in particular, came from Chicago and, in this family’s opinion, made the most positive impact on the students and staff who survived the tragedy. But they weren’t people. They were golden retrievers. As you know, golden retrievers can’t talk. Yet, this couple said that their kindergartener told the dogs things that he wouldn’t share with the mental health professionals. What made these dogs so helpful? I believe it was their non-judgmental presence. That is more powerful than anything anyone can say. Your presence at these difficult times shows that you care.

In my thirty-three years in K–12 education, I experienced the deaths of twenty-six students and staff members combined. Some of my experiences were as follows:

- I became a replacement teacher in a fifth-grade classroom for a teacher who was killed in an accident in the middle of the school year.
- An eighth-grade boy was hit and killed while riding his bike to school.
- An eighth-grade girl was killed after crashing into a garbage truck while riding a four-wheeler.
- A senior in high school unexpectedly died by suicide one morning before school.
- A popular industrial arts teacher died suddenly from a heart attack before school.
- A seventh-grade girl died of a brain aneurism during the school day outside my classroom.

None of us can fully prepare for tragedies such as these. Even with the best preparation, our feet are still knocked out from under us when it happens. The loss of a student or staff member impacts the entire school family. It is shocking and heartbreaking. It impacts students every time they walk into a classroom and see an empty desk, a space that reminds them of the person who died, or a substitute teacher sitting in for a teacher who died.

In this short book, I wish to share with you the lessons I have learned in order to help you, your students, the parents of your students, and your staff through these challenging times.

1

Lessons Learned in Loss

One of the most important lessons I learned in dealing with loss in the education setting was that the comforting phase must come before counseling takes place. This phase is best accomplished in what I call Classroom Defusing Discussions facilitated by the teacher. I will provide an example in just a moment, but first I want to share some basic principles for the classroom defusing discussions. Teachers, educators, and counselors should all keep these principles in mind.

- Explanations must be simple, not medical or theological.
- Over-explaining reflects your own anxiety to the students.
- Students need to talk, not just be talked to!
- When talking to students about suicide, *never* say “he or she is better off.”
- It is not the *expression* but the *suppression* of feeling that is most harmful.
- The way you are most doomed to failure in handling a tragedy is to deny or ignore it.
- Students’ greatest needs at this time are *trust* and *truth*.

Classroom Defusing Discussion

1. The classroom teacher should start with an opening statement:

Grief Myths and Facts

MYTHS	FACTS
The pain will go away if you ignore it.	Acknowledging the pain is best. If we don't hurt, we won't heal.
If we don't cry, we aren't grieving.	Crying isn't the only response to grief.
Time will heal.	It is what we do with time that heals.
Grieving is dysfunctional.	NOT grieving a loss is dysfunctional.
I must protect my child from such pain.	I must help attend to my child's pain.
Grief is a mental illness.	Grief is a normal response to loss.
People go through predictable stages.	Grief is an individual unique journey.
It's okay to "fudge" a few facts to my child.	Honesty is the best policy.
With time, we can get back to "normal."	There now will be a new "normal."
My pain is due to a lack of faith.	People of faith also grieve.
I have to be strong for my child.	It is okay to let the child know you are grieving too.
I don't feel anything. Something is wrong.	Usually, numbness sets in at first.
A child's grief is short in duration.	A child's grief may be long, possibly longer than many adults.
I can help my child get over her grief.	Grief is an experience you never get over, but you can get through.

Normal Versus Abnormal Grief for Children and Adolescents

NORMAL	ABNORMAL
Responds to comfort and support	Rejects comfort and support
Uses play to express grief	Resists play
Connects depressed feelings with death	Doesn't relate feeling to life events
Often open and angry	May not directly express anger
Still experiences moments of joy	Projects a pervasive sense of doom
Caring adults can sense a feeling of chronic sadness and emptiness	Projects hopelessness and emptiness
May express guilt over some aspect	Has overwhelming feelings of guilt about the loss
Self-esteem temporarily impacted	Deep loss of self-esteem