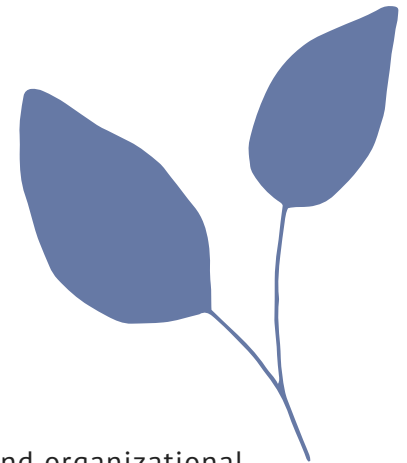


GRIEF GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATORS AND YOUTH WORKERS



The COVID-19 pandemic, economic crisis, upheaval of life as we know it, and the movement of protesting state sanctioned violence against Black communities have created a sociopolitical environment that is foreign to most people in the United States. While the pandemic has initiated a period of collective trauma and loss on a national level, it is vital that we understand that the financial, health, and violence crises some are experiencing and paying attention to for the first time have been the reality of many for years. This nation has been in a constant state of unrest, and the neglect of the needs of communities is not a new phenomenon. Students and families across Missouri have experienced great loss, both during and before this time. As the status quo for everyday life has shifted for the foreseeable future, it is absolutely vital that educators, administrators, and all who work in the lives of our students recognize the urgency of walking with students through loss. As districts prepare for reopening in the fall, students will be entering buildings across the state carrying the weight of grief into their classrooms. Without a commitment to understanding and honoring this grief, students will struggle in silence, expected to perform at a level that may not be possible in the midst of loss. While we grapple with the new normal, what has been lost in order to get here, and how we will move onward toward healing, we must remember that during times of crisis there is great opportunity for the evaluation of how we have harmed students in the past by neglecting their needs and for the transformation of school and organizational structure and culture.

This informal guidance for youth-serving professionals, including teachers, school administrators, after-school program directors, and non-profit staff, will provide processing tools, considerations, and questions that will serve as a catalyst for the creation of school and organizational culture that identifies, values, and addresses grief without punishment. In building capacity to support the grief process as students enter into this next school year, emphasis must be placed on the reality that healing is not linear and will look different for every student. The complexities of the grief process highlight the urgency of building communal responses that will activate students to heal.



Alive and Well Communities focuses on addressing and changing practices and organizational structures that impact communities and perpetuate inequities within the educational context. The considerations and processing tools presented in this document are offered as suggestions for decision makers and stakeholders who impact the experiences of young people in schools. These suggestions, however, do not serve as replacements for therapeutic services for students, rather as a consistent guide for supporting and building a trauma informed culture that addresses grief holistically. In order to meet the needs of all students in our districts, we must honor and recognize the unique needs of students of different racial and ethnic identities, sexual orientations, religious backgrounds, gender identities, and socioeconomic statuses. The intersections of these identities and the compounding systems of oppression will have an impact on how students relate to the current context and respond to loss. Because students from marginalized groups have to be taught how to survive within oppressive systems, the socialization processes that accompany these lessons of survival teach young people how they are to face hardship and respond emotionally. Lessons of survival teach young people to suppress their emotions and constrain their responses to loss, reducing access to the full range of valid emotions that are a part of the grief process. This indicates that the need to address their loss and heal are processes that impede their ability to survive under oppressive systems.



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In order to create spaces of healing that resist systems of oppression, we must address the historical inequities that have been exacerbated during this time through shifts in school culture with urgency. This guidance focuses on equipping school leaders, caregivers, educators, and all who impact the lives of students to consider how they enter into the healing processes to help students or harm them through punitive or apathetic responses to loss.

Grief work points us to actively and intentionally apply the trauma lens to our work – reframing the question of “what is wrong with our students” to “what has happened to them.” The active commitment to honestly answering this question will require us to abandon our preconceived notions of how youth experience grief and loss and center them in our development of practices that will facilitate healing. Our notions of how students grieve and experience loss are often dictated by how we label their responses are “angry” or “unproductive” or how we set the expectation of linear healing that has a defined end date. Because youth-serving professionals are not prepared to walk with students through their grief or provide consistent space for the process, they become limited by their own understanding of grief, which is often incomplete as well. Without student leadership in this work, we will fail to provide them with the support necessary for a trauma-informed school culture.

This guidance is grounded in five core beliefs:

1. We believe that in order to authentically work with youth through this process, adults must be honest about their own perceptions of grief, healthy grieving, and their lack of understanding of this process. As adults, we are rarely taught how to grieve in a way that honors what has been lost and propels us towards healing. Without an intentional look within ourselves, we will not be able to support students in this process. Grief work will require radical humility, empathy, and self-reflection.
2. When working with youth in the grief process, we must become satisfied with not having the perfect answers. Because grief takes on new forms in each student, staff, administrators, teachers, and mentors must actively unpack their discomfort with sitting with students in their pain.
3. Grief is not a linear process. The expectation of a timeline often undermines the necessity of the processes, causing confusion when our grief lingers longer than expected. We must set the understanding that grief can be constant or fleeting. It has the ability to manifest itself in new ways each time we encounter loss. Setting the expectation of patience in this process will set our students on a path of *understanding* their grief and moving forward *with* it rather than *dealing with* their grief and moving on *from* it. Remember: Grief is not something to be solved. It is processed.
4. The unique grieving rituals across different cultures must be brought to the forefront of the conversation. Without the inclusion of community and elder wisdom on this topic, there is the potential that our students will receive conflicting definitions of the grief process, which could create deep mistrust if their practices are belittled and neglected as valid. In order to address the racial and cultural differences in responses, we must identify how American individualism has socialized us to believe that grief is experienced in isolation and should be dealt with alone. Moving toward collective support aligns with the community practices of many of our students.
5. The voices of students must guide the grief process. As those with power in school buildings, classrooms, and other organizations, it is necessary to create intentional avenues for youth to guide this work. In our commitment to radical humility, we must be willing to hear when our methods are not working and do not serve youth’s needs.



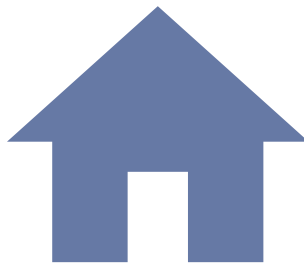
Defining Loss

It is important that there is an understanding of what loss can be. Often, when discussing grief, the emphasis is placed on the loss of loved ones. However, in order to holistically address the impact of this current moment on the lives of our students, we must be willing to expand the definition of loss beyond this one understanding. Staff, teachers, and administrators have to be willing to identify the areas within their own lives where they have experienced loss as well. By doing this, a more honest space for disclosure and processing can be made for students.

What have we lost?

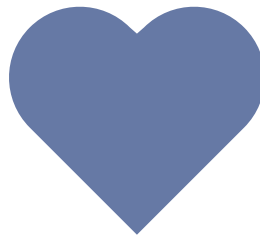
In this current moment, families and students across the region have lost:

- Financial security
- Housing
- Food security
- Normalcy and a sense of certainty
- Jobs and opportunities
- Family and community members
- Rest and a sense of peace



In other times in our lives, we experience the loss of:

- Faith and religious belief
- Friendships
- Opportunities
- Safety and security
- Mental wellness
- Physical wellness and needs
- Love and trust



This list is incomplete. Not only because there is no certainty and we can experience the loss of many things across the life-course but also because it is vital that we include students in building a full understanding of loss. By centering their definitions of loss, we will have a better understanding of how young people within the realm of our influence are comprehending the world around them, informing our support of their healing. **When walking with students through this process, ask them to write down and name how they have experienced loss in their lives.**

When we present a more comprehensive understanding of what loss can include, we create space for young people to recognize that in their lives they have already experienced some level of grief. As we consider the process of youth opening up about their losses, consider what context, timing, and supports should be available to help them process the psychological and emotional responses that arise from sharing those losses. Students will be able to recall what their grief response looked like in the past and analyze what worked and what did not. This internal self-reflection will provide youth with the language to define their own experience, connect with others in their loss, and recognize that there is no singular definition for what can be lost in life.

Example Processing Questions for Students

- In your community, how is loss defined? In your family, how is loss defined?
- What have you lost that you feel was belittled or undermined? How did this impact how you responded to your loss?
- Do you feel as though there is a hierarchy of loss? What is the purpose of this hierarchy?
- What consistent conversations and consistent supports are necessary at school in order to help you build a better understanding of loss?



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Trauma and the Grief Response

The Missouri Model for Trauma-Informed Schools indicates that an essential part of building a trauma-informed school with a culture that empowers and supports students is that students are given information about stress, trauma, and emotional/behavioral regulation. Trauma-informed schooling dictates a cultural and procedural dedication to creating spaces for students to gain access to such information. In learning the language around trauma and stress, students are simultaneously given opportunities to develop new coping skills. Research indicates that when we provide students with information about social-emotional health, they are more equipped for health development in the present and future. Learning opportunities that align with their life experiences are more meaningful and therefore have a greater impact on their sustainability and application. This indicator aligns with the core beliefs of grief work and processing. Since grief is an emotional response to loss that can majorly impact students behavior within the school building, their families, and communities, it is absolutely vital that we provide them with the language to describe the physiological response their body and mind have to the trauma and stress that can result from loss.

 STUDENTS ARE GIVEN AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION ABOUT STRESS, TRAUMA, AND EMOTIONAL/BEHAVIORAL REGULATION AND OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP NEW COPING TOOLS.				
STAGE 0	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Pre-Trauma Aware	Trauma Aware	Trauma Sensitive	Trauma Responsive	Trauma Informed
<p>No instruction is provided to students about stress, trauma, or regulation</p> <p>No pro-active strategies are in place to support regulation</p>	<p>Some staff use practices that aim to increase the capacity of students to cope and remain regulated</p> <p>Informal or one-on-one education may be done on the impact of stress and trauma for individual students</p>	<p>Students are given some intentional instruction about stress, trauma, and regulation</p> <p>There are universal practices in place that teach students healthy, sustainable coping tools and allow them to practice those in the educational environment</p> <p>Students are given access to materials and spaces that help them increase their regulation capacity</p>	<p>Standardized instruction is provided to all students about stress and trauma and a robust, culturally responsive set of coping tools are routinely referenced</p> <p>As appropriate, students are engaged as peer educators and help to lead supportive practices</p>	<p>Information about stress, trauma, and regulation is embedded within the curriculum</p> <p>Both formal and informal practices routinely demonstrate an understanding of the need to and process of increasing regulation</p> <p>Schools act as leaders to their community stakeholders in education about trauma and the promotion of regulation strategies</p>



When embedding trauma and grief information into curriculum, there are certain aspects of the trauma and grief process that are essential to include:

- 1) flight, fight, or freeze;
- 2) compounding stress and grief impacts the amount of additional stress a student can tolerate;
- 3) common reactions to loss; and
- 4) redefining healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

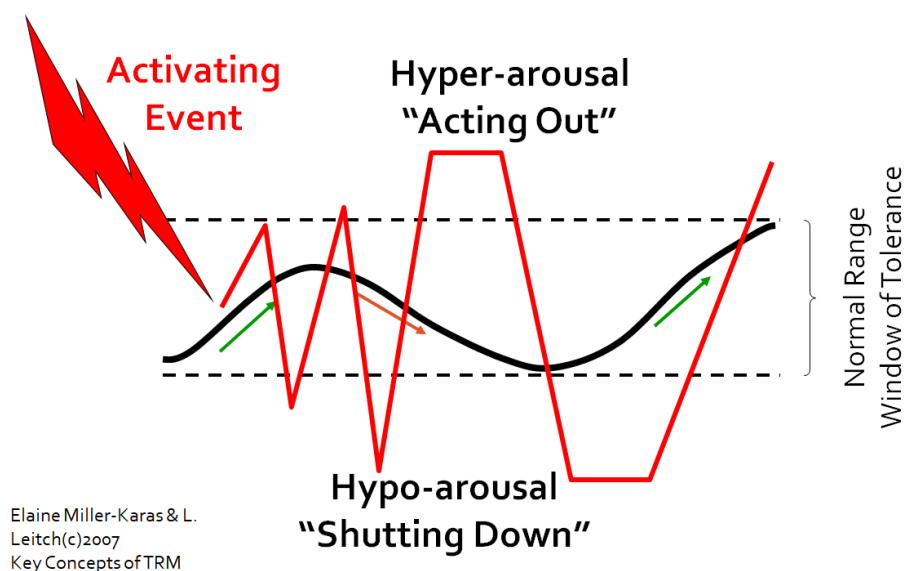
Flight, Fight, or Freeze

The typical three survival responses are: fight, flight, freeze. These three responses arise from the 'stress response system.' The stress response system is nature's way of helping people sense and respond to threat. The system is designed to keep us safe and survive a threatening encounter. Like all survival mechanisms, the stress response system generates automatic physical and psychological reactions to potential harm. The fight response may be physical or verbal. The flight response may be physical and/or psychological/mental. The freeze (stuck in place/space) response may also be physical or mental/emotional. Behaviors and words used in a stress response are as unique as the person who feels unsafe and the situation(s) in which they find themselves. Stress responses (words and behaviors) are in-the-moment ways to keep youth safe given the resources and skills accessible to them in the moment. They are not necessarily indications of character and strength.

It is important to note that youth are often dependent upon and usually subordinate to adults who have power and authority due to age and relative position. That power imbalance increases the potential for harmful interactions to occur. It also enables the potential to implement supports for optimal development, grief support, and healing. Adults can behave more supportively with youth's fight, flight, freeze responses by being aware of a youth's history of trauma and/or being sensitive to a potential (but unknown) history of trauma, loss, or grief.

Compounding Stress and Grief

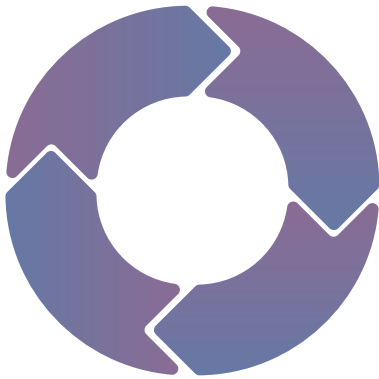
Trauma science shows us that grief processing can influence how much additional stress a person can tolerate in the moment and how they show up during interactions with others. Being overly burdened decreases the additional amounts and types of stress a person can tolerate. The capacity to carry additional stress in any moment is referred to as a person's "window of stress tolerance."



The window of stress tolerance marks the cumulative limits of how much more a person can bear, in each moment, before they automatically begin to act out, flee, or get stuck (fight, flight, freeze).



According to extended research on adverse childhood experiences, approximately seven out of ten adults report they experienced at least one event between birth and eighteen years of age that affected their ability to cope. Some research shows that Black and Hispanic youth are at greater risk of experiencing adversity in childhood. The effects of those adverse childhood experiences can be made worse by loss and change. In fact, loss and change may be the cause of childhood adversity. For example, youth may have experienced death or estrangement from a parent or loved one, disconnection from birth family and the promise of parenting relationships, or incarceration of a loved one, to name a few common adversities. Responses to loss and change may add to the existing stressors of adverse childhood experiences related to abuse, neglect, household instability, and adverse community/societal dynamics.



In processing the dual burden of general adverse childhood experiences and grief/loss/change, youth can cycle through periods of healthy calm, acting out, freezing, and/or shutting down. They may develop greater sensitivity to potential psychological and physical threat. Youth may be even more likely to demonstrate fight, flight, freeze responses. Stress responses may be activated as youth experience the effects of stress and reminders of the harm caused or what has been lost/changed or withheld. Becoming trauma-responsive requires individuals and organizations to implement practices that normalize an empathetic and healing-centered approach to those acting out, freezing, or shutting down stress responses.

Reactions to Loss and Coping Mechanisms

Our understanding of the grief process is most likely rooted in the common model of the “Five Stages of Grief.” However, this model can be extremely limiting in understanding how we process, cope, and heal in the aftermath of loss. The linear nature of the five stages conveys the message that the responses our bodies and minds have to grief are foreseeable. Instead of setting expectations for our responses to grief, we can align our understanding to the trauma response model of “Flight, Fight, Freeze.” By shifting our understanding from a set pathway to this model which provides us with language for how we are responding to stress, trauma, and loss, we can actively dismantle the misunderstanding that grief is linear. Common reactions to loss (i.e. grief) involve both physical and psychological manifestations of distress. The grief responses are listed under “Flight, Fight, Freeze” in order for us to be able to identify both the grief response **AND** the stress or trauma response students are experiencing. This list is incomplete; students will experience grief in unique ways, and it is vital that we do not limit how their minds and bodies are able to respond.

FIGHT

Feelings of longing, rumination on what/who was lost, denial, compartmentalization, disinterest, loss of faith, forgetfulness, avoidance of people/situations, calm, relief

FLIGHT

Anger, mood swings, asking “why” questions, fear, change in beliefs or values, need to find meaning in the loss, blaming others, bitterness, anxiety, feeling out of control

FREEZE

Depression, sadness, inability to sleep, inability to concentrate on tasks, isolation, loss of appetite, loneliness, hopelessness, shame, numbness, physical pain in the body, neglecting hygiene, guilt



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In much discourse on the grieving process, we identify healthy and unhealthy responses. This dichotomy can cause young people to believe that the ways that their bodies and minds are naturally responding to loss are unnatural, irrational, or invalid. In order to reduce stigmatization of certain responses, those who are working with students must unpack their own beliefs around what is healthy and unhealthy. Consider these questions as a starting point:

1. If a student came to you say that their response to their grief is over-eating and isolation, how would you respond? What advice would you give them?
2. Would you be able to identify a grief response within a student? How would you encourage them to address their grief?
3. Are these responses to a student's natural response focused on supporting student growth or rooted in providing band-aid approaches to healing?

We have to be willing to grapple with the fact that the responses we may define as unhealthy are often reflective of our own perceptions of healing as a linear, fast process. For students who respond in ways that we may not see as productive, we must be willing to recognize that these responses are working for them in this moment and engage them in discussion about what is working for them and how to continue forward. Initial responses to grief are ways that our bodies and minds grapple with the severity of the loss that we have experienced. Because these responses can take on many forms, it is necessary to not belittle a student's response or render it invalid.

Instead we can actively engage students in conversations around the perceptions of coping mechanisms, how they serve us in the interim, how they impact our wellbeing, and how they may manifest themselves across the grieving process. While some grief responses and coping mechanisms are seen right after the activating event, others will become useful in processing grief at other points over the course of their healing. Many who experience grief, before they feel like they are healed or have moved into a place of acceptance, will experience several highs and lows. Coping mechanisms can serve to inspire movement forward, as self and community preservation, and as a means to sit with and address grief at the pace that each individual needs.

While we are working with students, we need to provide the space to discuss what health means and will look like for them in this process. Without including their input, their cultural understanding of loss and coping, and redefining how we perceive health, we could cause more harm to students who are in the midst of hurting.



This harm can manifest in:

- Shaming students for their responses
- Blaming students for their grief
- Punishing students for not performing as expected
- Rushing the healing process
- Refusing to recognize that each student will have a unique response to grief
- Driving students into further isolation because they do not feel as though they have a brave space to process their needs and feelings



Supporting Our Students and Communities in Their Grief and Healing

Trauma-informed schooling requires that stakeholders in education do not retraumatize students through policies and practices. Providing support in the grief and healing process is a concrete way for educators, administrators, and staff to actively engage in undoing systems of re-traumatization. The guidance for supporting students is informed and grounded in the [principles of trauma-informed care](#): **trustworthiness, equity, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and safety**. This guidance, through the principles, will provide considerations for those who are trusted adults in the lives of students. The principles will build upon each other in order to create an approach and culture that honors the process of healing through grief.



Trustworthiness

The principle of trustworthiness requires that stakeholders “foster genuine relationships and practices that build trust, making tasks clear, maintaining appropriate boundaries and creating norms for interaction that promote reconciliation and healing. [They] understand and respond to ways in which explicit and implicit power can affect the development of trusting relationships.”

Fostering genuine relationships with students is the first step in creating the conditions for students to feel comfortable and supported in their grief and healing. Without a commitment to knowing and understanding young people, stakeholders will not be able to provide authentic support. Through the healing process, students may disclose personal information or ask for advice from personal experiences. Maintaining healthy boundaries balances how we share our lives with students and requires us to extend parts of ourselves and stories to establish trust while also respecting the student-adult dynamic.

Trusting relationships are built in honoring mutual humanity. Engaging in practices of storytelling and sharing about times of grief and lessons from our healing centers the resilience, our capacity for growth in the midst of hardship, and connection across relationships. Storytelling can serve as a method for students to garner what they need from the stories of others. This method works to establish trusting relationships not only between students and adults but also among students themselves. By centering the experiences of this process, stakeholders can create space for community building and connection through vulnerability and healing.

Examples:

- *Teachers create time within their classrooms for students to participate in story-telling around various topics, including healing and loss. These times of sharing are incorporated into the fabric of the classroom structure and not only used in times of hardship.*
- *Staff dedicate time during the month to meet one-on-one with their students. Regular check-ins serve as opportunities for students to share their successes, joys, and trials. In schools, administrators can set up structures that ensure that each student is being reached by these meetings.*

Processing Questions

- Who are the adults in the building who have been identified by students as trustworthy? How was this decision made?
- How has a lack of trustworthiness impacted the culture of our school or program?
- How will establishing trustworthiness impact our status quo moving forward?



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Choice

The principle of choice requires that stakeholders “maximize choice, addressing how privilege, power, and historic relationships impact both perceptions about and ability to act upon choice.”

Stakeholders must give students the time and decision-making opportunities of how they will process and hold their grief. For some students, addressing their grief vocally will occur after the activating event. For others, they will take their time in becoming comfortable in expressing how they are feeling, what they need, and how they will proceed through their process. In each step of the healing journey, choice in how to address grief, cope, and move forward must be held by the student. The role of a trusted adult is to inspire movement forward, provide active support, and address how their presence in the students' life may be actively causing harm.

Processing Questions

- How is harm from adults addressed in our school or organization?
- What are our beliefs about the grief process and the time it takes to heal? How have these beliefs impacted the spaces and opportunities we provide for students to process loss?
- Do we allow for students to take their time in expressing their needs? How is this communicated?
- What will be required to change within our culture and structure to allow for time, patience, and movement forward?

Because students will express themselves in their own time, it is important that stakeholders become comfortable with the fact that some will not have the words and will need other forms of expression to conceptualize and share how they are experiencing loss and grief. It is vital that spaces are created for unique expression and secure the choice of students to process their emotions in ways that reflect their needs.

Examples:

- *Students are given the language to describe the physical and psychological responses they are having as grief responses. Adults consistently reinforce that healing is not linear and that each response is unique.*
- *Creative interventions are developed with the expertise of both students and staff. This could include creative writing workshops, art and music projects, or opportunities for community work and civic engagement.*

Collaboration

The principle of collaboration requires that stakeholders “honor transparency and self-determination, and seek to minimize the impact of the inherent power differential while maximizing collaboration and sharing responsibility for making meaningful decisions.”

Collaboration with students requires involving them at every point of the planning of practices and the cultivation of culture. Creating the space for students to share their perspectives on how the environment has suppressed opportunities for healing and how these procedures can change is vital for movement forward. The inherent power differential within the classroom or school can force students to remain silent in their suffering. Stakeholders must be active and intentional in bringing students' voices to the forefront.

Grief does not happen in isolation. Collaborative methods of grief work center the necessity of community in the healing process. By incorporating these approaches, there is more opportunity to build an understanding of how we respond to one another in the process of loss, pain, and healing. Students know each other best. Engaging them in the building of community will give stakeholders access to better understanding student needs and their vision for healing through loss.



Examples:

- Structures for student guidance and leadership are put in place that extend beyond a singular time for feedback, such as a town hall or listening session. Instead, strategies for student input and guidance are sustainable and consistent in the forms of advisory committees that meet frequently with administrators or staff.
- Students are able to guide community building and community healing rituals. Community leaders are called on to aid in helping students inform and guide the work.
- Administration and organizational leaders create systems of accountability for teachers who are actively causing harm. Students who are harmed by teachers are included in the accountability process.

Empowerment

The principle of empowerment requires that stakeholders “encourage self-efficacy, identifying strengths, and building skills which lead to individual pathways for healing while recognizing and responding to the impact of historical trauma and oppression.”

The work of empowering students in their connection with their emotions, loss, grief, and healing is work that will require those with power to hand over that power to students, supporting them through identifying their strengths, giving opportunities for leadership, and giving them access to defining their own path. The relinquishing of such power over students will open up the space for them to guide us toward more sustainable healing because it is within their image.

Empowerment insists that the structural impacts of historical trauma and oppression are addressed in tangible ways. The losses of this current moment are rooted in systemic inequities that have persisted throughout the history of the United States. Our Black and Brown students are experiencing this moment in a unique way, carrying personal, familial, and community grief with them at all times. Empowering these students means centering their needs and heeding their wisdom. Creating spaces for Black and Brown students to grieve collectively while also providing opportunities for them to lead this conversation can elevate their needs and their brilliance. The work of empowering young people cannot be divorced from their self-care.

Processing Questions

- How have we collaborated with students in the past? Was this collaboration sustained or to address one single issue?
- What structures are in place for student involvement and feedback?
- Do students feel silenced by teachers, administrators, and staff?
- How is community built and fostered in our school or organization?

Processing Questions

- How is power structured and allocated in our school or organization? How are those in power perceived?
- Has power been given to students to inform policies, procedures, and structures? Do we, as decision-makers and stakeholders, even believe that our students are capable of leadership?
- What informs our beliefs about students and their capacity to guide and lead us? How have we stood in the way of realizing this potential?

Examples:

- Staff are required to engage in learning opportunities around structural inequities and anti-racism. These teach-ins are led by community experts and members who are pursuing racial justice and equity in their communities.
- Students from marginalized groups are given the opportunity to create affinity groups that serve as places for collective mourning, healing, and celebration.



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Safety

The principle of safety requires that stakeholders “ensure physical and emotional safety, recognizing and responding to how racial, ethnic, religious or sexual identity may impact safety.”

Safety and ensuring safe places for this process are non-negotiable. Because grief compounds with stress, students may respond in ways that would historically be addressed with punishment. However, in order to create environments that insist on healing and support, punishment cannot be the response. Stakeholders must review and revise discipline policies and procedures – identifying how they cause harm and which students are disproportionately impacted. This requires those intervening when a student is distressed or lashing out to not assume the worst of a student but rather be equipped with empathetic listening and de-escalation methods in order to ground the student and help them in their struggling. By refusing to respond with punishment, stakeholders are able to redefine how grief is addressed and maintain a level of trust between them and their students.

In order to ensure safety, teachers, staff, and administrators must commit to understanding how the intersecting identities of their students impact their experiences with grief and loss. This will require active listening, space for students to share their beliefs and cultures, and the active inclusion of multicultural practices to guide new rituals of healing.

Examples:

- *Staff, administrators, and students develop plans for intervention that do not include punishment. This could manifest in a restorative or peace room, i.e intentional space created for students to have the opportunity to self-regulate.*
- *Staff are trained in empathetic listening practices and informed on non-Western healing rituals that can be shared with students as practices for the grief process.*

Processing Questions

- How has punishment been a part of our school or organizational culture as the procedural response to grief, stress, and trauma?
- How has safety been defined by administrators and teachers? Have we included student voice in this definition?

Equity

The principle of equity requires that stakeholders commit to ensuring “a state of being in which an individual’s outcomes are no longer predictable by race or other demographic factor. The process of giving individuals what they need, not just what’s ‘equal.’”

As stated throughout this guidance, giving students the resources, space, and language to both describe their loss and define their process of healing is equity work. The process of giving students what they need requires a deep understanding of inequity and how it is perpetuated in all spaces for students who are most impacted by marginalization and oppression. Stakeholders will need to engage in consistent learning and active resistance against racist, sexist, xenophobic, transphobic, homophobic, and classist structures that restrict students from having access to freedom and healing in their schools.



The commitment that stakeholders make to this process of equity will be seen by students. They will feel it in the hallways, in the way that teachers speak to them, and in the outcomes of their grief process. Supporting healing requires a consistent dedication to unlearning the ways that stakeholders have been taught to treat students and what to expect from them. By engaging in this unlearning process, we can create more pathways to healing for students, families, and communities. This work is necessary to reconstruct power structures that exile the wisdom of caregivers, community members, and students. Equity means that educators, administrators, and staff do not make moves forward without being in conversation with the community—listening and following their voice.

Examples:

- *Staff and administrators engage in the process of evaluating school policies and procedures that harm students, especially those who are most impacted by marginalization and oppression. This process is informed by students, caregivers, and community leaders.*
- *Teachers and staff are required to participate in rigorous trauma-informed, anti-racist training on a consistent basis.*
- *The school or organization creates equity indicators and goals. Community-informed evaluation tools are created to assess how the school or organization is achieving equity.*

Processing Questions

- What specific goals have been set for our school or program? How do these goals center equity and students from marginalized groups?
- Have we built an understanding of the history and reality of systems of oppression and how our school or organization upholds these systems?
- Have we been clear and consistent in our resistance to racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and xenophobia?
- How are community members and caregivers guiding our vision and mission? Is there a lack of trust that needs to be addressed and healed?

The hardest truth to grapple with at times is that we cannot protect young people from the pain and reality of loss and grief. Instead, we have the honor to teach them, learn from them, and walk alongside them as we all are confronted by the heartbreaking aspects of life. In all honesty, we have not been serving our students well in regards to grief. We have failed, and that cannot be a stumbling block. It is now that we can engage in this essential work ourselves and with our students because it is necessary for our collective healing. Our schools and organizations must continue to transform into places where healing is possible because grief and loss are embraced and honored. When we create a culture that does not fear what is hard and takes time, our students will be stronger, healthier, kinder, and wiser.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought inequities that many have been dealing with for decades to national attention – the digital divide, lack of access to healthcare, financial instability, food insecurity, racial disparities in health, education, and wealth, and the lack of government intervention or care. One thing has become glaringly clear – things can never be the same. As we move forward collectively, we must make a commitment to reimagining and reshaping our schools, organizations, policies, procedures, and cultures so that we maintain momentum forward toward healing. Our work has only just begun. ◆



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