

# The Pandemic Is Raging. Here's How to Support Your Grieving Students

What teachers need to know about the science of grief

By Brittany R. Collins

November 12, 2020

Over the past few decades, trauma-informed teaching has gained ground in the United States, yet rarely is grief included in the conversation. In the midst of a global pandemic, with teachers and students confronting loss in and outside the classroom in new and myriad ways, it is more critical than ever to apply a grief-sensitive lens to our conversations about curricula and trauma in the school system. We are not the people we were a year ago. And understanding the ways in which grief and trauma intersect with teaching and learning allows us to better cater to students' new needs while we recognize and honor our own.

Prior to the start of COVID-19, approximately **1 in 14 children** lost a parent or sibling before his or her 18th birthday. For years, teachers have not felt equipped to support students through this widespread grief. According to one **2012 survey**, fewer than 1 percent of teachers received training related to grief support during their preservice training, and only 3 percent of teachers reported access to grief-related professional development in their district.

If you've worked with students, you've likely confronted loss: A student's parent or grandparent passes away, or a dog dies, or a neighborhood shooting occurs close to home, and a student enters the classroom with a disrupted worldview. Grief also intersects with inequity: **Three million young people** witness gun violence every year, according to an analysis by the gun-safety group Everytown. The highest exposure to that violence takes place in under-resourced communities where poverty, racism, and discrimination result in disproportionate exposure to adverse childhood events and the subsequent chance of developing later-life mental- and physical-health problems. We need to acknowledge the presence of grief in the learning environment before we can create a classroom community that buffers the long-term impacts of loss and related childhood adversity.

But what is most important for teachers to know about grief to support bereaved students? What of the scientific literature regarding grief and trauma is most relevant for practicing teachers?

We can begin by peeking into the grieving brain to better understand the behaviors that might manifest in the classroom. For some people, grief can be traumatic. For all people, it involves a "fight or flight" response mediated by the autonomic nervous system, as well as a **depressive response**. As with our trauma response, both of these stages **affect the immune and endocrine systems**, sleep cycle, and executive functioning, which includes impulse control, emotional regulation, and attention.

**"Relationships are our greatest antidote to loss and trauma."**

In the classroom, grieving students—like those enduring trauma—**might present** with anger, outbursts, attention troubles, attachment-seeking, or avoidant behaviors, to name just several examples, all of

[← Back to Story](#)



Do what  
**4.8MM+**  
students are  
doing with  
LEXIA and

**LEARN MORE** ▶

**Lexia** OUR PROOF YOUR POWER

which impede learning and relationship-building.

In a remote environment, it can prove extra challenging for teachers to not only identify and understand these manifestations but cater to the classroom environment accordingly. By emphasizing community, empowering choice, and integrating a mindfulness routine into the remote or hybrid learning environment, however, teachers of all levels can lay a foundation for supporting student success amid stress, especially for young people who are dealing with a personal loss.

Relationships are our greatest antidote to loss and trauma. Attachments with supportive caregivers—family members, mentors, teachers, coaches—who are available and attentive most of the time allow children, teens, and young adults to establish a sense of relational safety that serves as a salve against challenging circumstances. Such connections are particularly important for students who may not have access to attentive adults at home. Experiencing reciprocity, healthy boundaries, moments of **“break and repair”** (meaning resolution and maintained connection after an argument or relational disruption), and receiving encouragement as they seek to establish independence all contribute to the likelihood that students will adapt and recover from difficulty.

Experiences of grief and trauma can threaten young people’s **sense of future**, which caring adults can also help to preserve or restore through relationships. In the remote classroom, especially in the wake of a loss, build in time for one-on-one connection with students, whether through conferencing, individualized learning games, or asynchronous communication methods, to maintain the sense of community you are used to building in person.

Create opportunities for choice activities to afford students agency in their learning, especially when the experience of loss might threaten the level of control students have in their lives outside the classroom (or webcam). You can even empower students to recognize their own needs through seemingly small strategies, like allowing choice in literature assignments; offering multiple “brain break” activities from which to choose; being flexible about when in the day work can be completed; or offering several options for summative assessment (i.e., portfolio-based, project-based, or a research paper).

Finally, analyze your remote or hybrid learning plan and consider how you **structure routine** in students’ days, as well as your own. Humans crave predictability during tumultuous times. Consider what about your class structure remains the same across time and identify ways to infuse enrichment activities into this routine, especially those that support emotional regulation. For example, invite students to begin each day with five minutes of guided meditation or close class sessions with 10 minutes of free writing. Host a read-aloud at the start of class each Wednesday or invite students to share a favorite quote every Friday.

Such activities imbue the learning environment with a sense of community, a recognition of humanity, and a commitment to honor the needs of grieving students, while also building into your teaching routine spaces to support your well-being, too.

Because it can prove challenging for many students to talk about a personal loss, know that direct conversation, though potentially powerful for some students, is not necessarily the goal of grief support. We should never ignore a student’s grief or pretend that a loss didn’t occur (“Saying nothing says a lot,” as pediatrician David Schonfeld told **NPR** in 2015), but we can support students who are reticent by creating an environment supportive of **connection, safety, and emotional regulation**. These characteristics create a foundation for grieving students to succeed and, perhaps eventually, tell their story. They are what ground us all—whether we are 4, 14, or 40—as we face the unknown and commit to learning in spite of it.

MORE OPINION

Join the  
conversation.

Follow Education Week  
**Opinion** on Twitter

[Follow Opinion here.](#)