

Bereavement Management and Counseling at the University Level

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Overview

Universities and colleges are not usually prepared for what to do in the event of the death of a student, faculty, staff or administrator. Some schools do have a plan of action as to how to proceed. This plan is often based upon an unwritten or intuitive understanding of how a death affects those most at risk, as well as the implications for public relations for the institution. Even if there is a written plan there may not be people available who understand the special issues that pertain to the management of bereavement or how bereavement counseling differs from other kinds of counseling (Wrenn, 1991a). During the past 30 years a great deal of research and experience about the specific issues that facilitate one's grief and bereavement has been generated and published (Bowlby, 1973-1982; Parks & Weiss, 1983; Zinner, 1985). This information can be useful to those in a position of leadership whether or not there are trained counselors available.

Student Issues

Death education, as well as its partner in taboo subjects, sex education, has been introduced into the college curriculum within the past 10-15 years. Still, one of the primary concerns of students is where to go on campus for support and information when a death occurs without having to take a class on the subject. Students often regard the counseling service or mental health service on campus as a place to go for serious psychological problems, not to talk about their grief over a death. Campus ministry is sometimes sought out. Parents are less often sought out due to the student's need to become independent from past authorities. Students are hesitant to burden their friends with this "uncool stuff" for fear of making a fool of themselves. This is a major issue for students in need.

A second issue for students is what has been described as the third task of mourning, dealing with a changed environment (Worden, 1991). Students who have to drop out due to a death and return to school find it difficult to explain to their peers and teachers why they have been absent. Other members of the university community also have difficulty in knowing what to say to someone who has experienced a painful death of a family member or friend. Students may feel "weird" for being in the state they are in. No one seems to understand them.

A third issue is not knowing how to convince a skeptical teacher that they need time or help in making up late work, making up a missed exam or completing a dropped class.

There are a few things students want to hear when they are grieving. They want to know that they are dealing with things normally. They will often say, "If only I had done this", "If only I had known that." One way to help them realize that you can't second-guess a death is to draw a diagram as follows:

I-----**Death Occurs**-----I

The little dashes before the words **Death Occurs** represent

information they had prior to the death. Information they did not have occurs after the death, represented by the dashes after the words **Death Occurs**. They need to be led through the logic that they cannot use information after a death to say to themselves, "I should have known this before the death." You cannot take a different traffic route where an accident occurs because you know ahead of time that the accident will occur on that route. If we knew ahead of time that we would die at a given intersection of road, it is doubtful that we would take that route.

Next on the list of what students want to hear is that they don't have to fix their friend's or family's grief. To feel that they must put aside their own grief to fix someone else's grief is not only impossible but also unfair to both parties.

Students also want to know how to deliver bad news to others without making the situation more difficult for them or the person they are informing. Following are some guidelines that can be suggested to students dealing with this problem.

- Decide who is the best person to deliver the news.
- Have as many facts about the death available as possible before telling the person of the death.
- Notify in person if at all possible.
- Find a comfortable setting to deliver the news.
- Use a two part statement including how you feel about having to deliver the statement before using the "d" word, such as, "I am really sorry to have to tell you that X died in a traffic accident this morning."
- Then, say no more. Wait for a response. This is when the person you are informing begins to take over control of the situation.
- Answer any questions you can.
- Ask if they would like to call or have you call someone to be with them.
- Stay with them until help arrives.
- Write down how they can reach you if they want to.
- Follow up by phone later that day or the next day to see how they are doing.
- Understand that each situation is different and you can do no harm if you are honest and stick to what you know and feel.
- Debrief with someone you trust if you are unsettled by this event.

Institutional Issues

There are a number of actions the institution can and should take when a death has occurred (Wrenn, 1999). The first step is to appoint someone to manage the media, to inform the personnel who can intervene with those close to the person who died, and to inform faculty and others in a sensitive way. A more complete list of procedures considered to be important by those most involved is:

- Announce arrangements for students, faculty, staff and officials from the college/university to attend the funeral or memorial service.

- Prepare letters of recognition, appreciation or achievement to be given to the dying student or to the family, posthumously.

- Obtain the support of the president, vice-president, dean, department head and faculty familiar with the student to convey to the family and friends that the student was important to the college.

- Establish good channels of communication between police and campus personnel.

- Arrange for professionals to be available to work with roommates, friends, and family of the deceased.

- Provide a place and time for students and others to ask questions and express sorrow, concern or anger.

- Follow up on those most affected by the death.

- Issue some public recognition of the death, such as letters to those most concerned.

- Encourage those closest to the deceased to be involved in services and other events (Wrenn, 1994).

In higher education, the size and mission of the school determines much of what takes place when a student death occurs. The annual number of expected deaths per 10,000 student enrollment is about 4.5. Even though a university with an enrollment of 30,000 students will normally have 10-20 student deaths a year, the basic assumption by most is that a single death could or should have been prevented. In fact, the expected death rate in the student age group of 18-22 for non-college students is even higher (Wrenn, 1991b).

Counseling Considerations

Once the initial shock and emotional outpouring of a sudden death has been experienced, students will often turn to others for support. Some of the counseling considerations that are important in working with people who have experienced a recent death are:

- Acknowledging the various difficulties in dealing with a changed environment and set of circumstances

- Helping the student identify his/her feelings and thoughts about the deceased

- Providing time to grieve, which friends often don't do

- Interpreting what is normal

- Acknowledging individual differences in grieving

- Offering continued support

- Examining defenses and coping styles

- Identifying pathology for possible referral

Summary

Institutions of higher education are often not aware of the special considerations important to the management of a campus

death or the counseling of those who are bereaved. Student issues focus on where one can go on campus for support, how to handle feelings that seem new and unsettling, how to approach teachers and others for understanding, and how to deal with an environment that has suddenly changed from what it was. What seems to help is for some assurance to be offered as to what is normal in this situation, how to handle guilt, anger and sorrow, and how to talk with others in passing on the bad news of a death. The institution must concern itself with finding a "point person" to help manage information from within and without the institution. Some suggested procedures have been listed. Finally, there are special considerations in counseling the bereaved that have been mentioned. References for further information are included at the end of this article.

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This University accredited programme of 4 counselling modules allows the student to build on the introductory module which brings an understanding and appreciation of counselling and current models, and then leads the student into the more specialist counselling modules covering Grief and Bereavement, Couples and Families and Crisis and Trauma. On completion the student will have gained 120 SCQF points at level 9 (third year Ba/BSc.)

It looks at employing key skills of problem management, and opportunity development. It looks at the role of the bereavement counsellor in explaining and helping with; stages of grief, tasks of mourning, grieving rituals, a child and adolescent view of death, complicated grief, counselling the dying and other common issues. Bereavement counselling, whether it be one-on-one with a private therapist or in a group setting, aims to help an individual explore his or her emotions. At the first meeting, the bereaved will likely be asked about his or her loss, about his or her relationship to the deceased, and about his or her own life now that (s)he has lost a loved one. Answering these questions often means tapping into sadness or anger, so emotional outbursts should not be censored. Crying and yelling may come naturally during bereavement counselling and certainly will not offend the counsellor. Allowing an individual

ERIC Identifier: ED469355 Publication Date: 2002-09-00 Author: Wrenn, Robert L. Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services Greensboro NC. Bereavement Management and Counseling at the University Level. ERIC/CASS Digest. This Digest addresses two aspects of managing bereavement on campus: 1) the need for effective counseling practices to help students manage grief, whether due to a death on campus or due to the death of a loved one, and 2) the need for institutional procedures to respond to the death of a campus community member. Universities and colleges are not usually

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