

Understanding Grief: Personal and Community

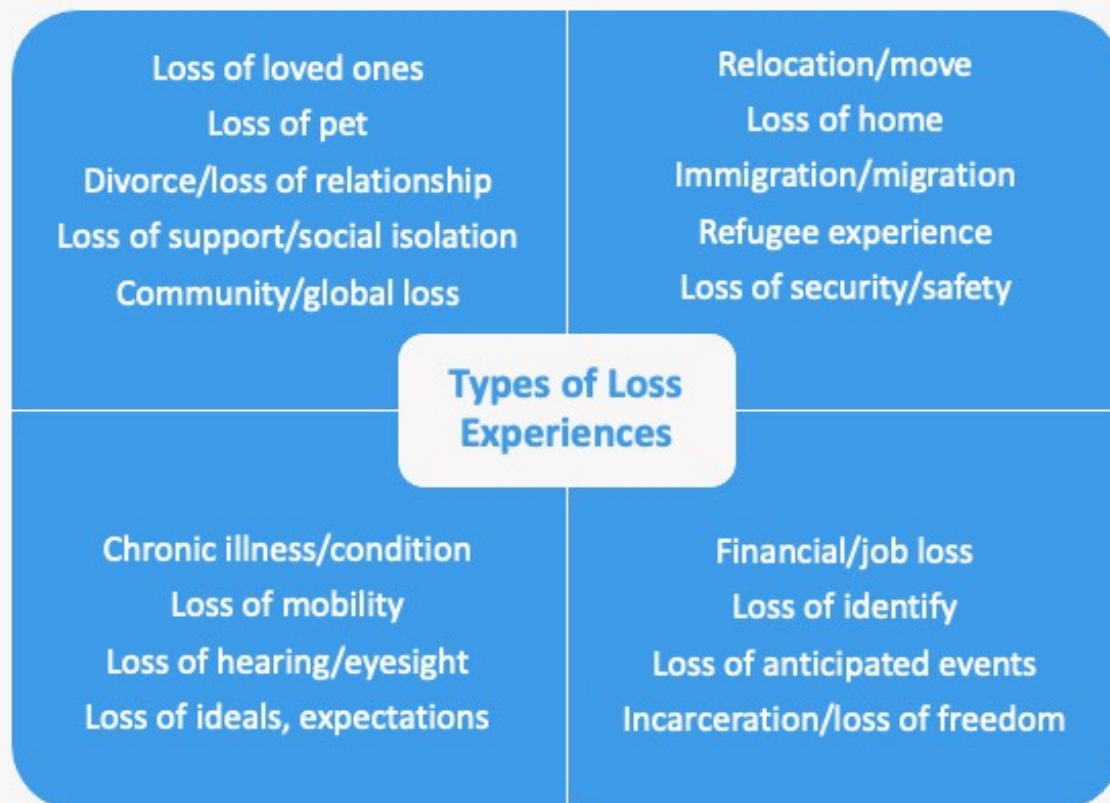
Climate Connection is a monthly publication of the NYS Center for School Safety.

"Grief is so human, and it hits everyone at one point or another, at least, in their lives. If you love, you will grieve, and that's just given."

– Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, Psychologist and Author



Grief is commonly defined as the emotional suffering that accompanies loss. We often think about grief in the context of personal loss but there are many other experiences that may activate a grief response, including loss of home, job, health or economic security (see image below). In addition, there are other events that may not impact us directly but create a grief reaction because we feel a connection based on shared humanity or identity. For example, when we read about war or genocide we may feel sad, angry or helpless even when we don't have a personal connection. In our grief, we may contribute to causes that lessen the suffering of those impacted. This is an example of the grief we experience based on our shared humanity. Similarly, even in the absence of a personal connection, students may experience a grief response to the death of another young person or someone with whom they have a shared identify (gender or sexual orientation, race or ethnicity). In this way, grief can be both an expression of personal loss, as well as an expression of collective loss (top left quadrant).



Resources

[The Consortium on Trauma, Illness and Grief in Schools](#)

[Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)

[Dougy Center: The National Grief Center for Children and Families](#)



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When schools experience a loss in the community, they respond quickly with grief counselors, information and community resources. However, the grief process unfolds over several years and we sometimes miss opportunities to provide on-going support. Below is a timeline of grief based on the work of David Kessler, a nationally recognized grief expert and author of *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. While there are variations in the grief process based on the loss experience, the individual's capacity to cope and many other factors, the timeline below helps us understand the grief process and recognize the challenges and reactions an individual may experience at each point.



- Immediate
- Emotional reactions may include: intense sadness, anger, disbelief, guilt, numbness, helplessness
- Physical reactions may include: headaches, loss of appetite, fatigue, aches
- Other reactions may include: confusion, memory loss, indecision, withdrawal, nightmares

- < 2 years
- Emotional and other responses listed in the acute phase may occur or continue particularly at holidays, anniversaries, and major life events.
- Adjustments are being made to routines and rituals to accommodate the loss and begin to move forward.

- > 2 years
- The individual develops coping strategies to manage grief.
- New routines are established, and new experiences are created to adjust to the loss.
- The individual finds meaning in the loss to honor their grief and recognize its impact.

What Schools Can Do?

Normalize grief - Provide staff with information and language to express support in times of loss whether it's a student's personal loss or an event in the community. Sometimes we hesitate to "bring it up" out of concern it will be upsetting to students but a brief statement acknowledging loss and expressing your care can be affirming and healing.

Be proactive - Loss is inevitable. Provide information about grief and community resources on your school website. Consider sending social media posts to remind the public about the resources at times of the year that may be difficult for those recently bereaved such as Holidays and graduation.

Be aware - Identify a system to share information about loss impacting students and their families (personal, homelessness, medical diagnosis) including anniversaries. One school used their internal staff calendar to track relevant anniversaries so staff could check in with students, and offer support and accommodations during emotionally difficult times.