

# **PLANNING FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTERMATH OF SCHOOL TRAGEDY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Nineteen steps in a postvention plan for coping with the aftermath of a major earthquake that results in death are presented as a guide for the school to develop its own crisis procedures. The plan is designed to meet three goals: reduce fear, facilitate grieving, and promote education. Suggestions for class discussion of the tragedy are offered.

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## **PLANNING FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AFTERMATH OF A SCHOOL TRAGEDY**

Our purpose is to discuss a basic postvention plan that can be adopted for use in any school following a death or tragedy. The plan is designed to go into effect the first school day after the trauma has occurred.

To initiate thinking about postvention, consider the following specific questions that will usually arise: (questions modified from Dunne, et al. 1987, p. 247).

1. How and when should students and faculty be informed of the pertinent details surrounding it?
2. How, when, and where should students be allowed to express their reactions?
3. What should be done for victims' close friends?
4. What should be done for "high risk" students?
5. Should the school hold a special assembly or memorial service?
6. Should there be a symbolic expression of grief, such as lowering the flag to half mast?
7. Should the school close for the funeral?
8. Who should go to the funeral?
9. What kinds of commemorative activities or symbols - plaques, memorial funds, etc. - are appropriate?
10. Should the victims' parents be contacted and what help can be offered to them?
11. What should be done about the concerns of other parents?
12. How should the school deal with the media?
13. Should the school turn for outside consultation to help? To whom?
14. What reactions from students should be expected?
15. Should a regular school schedule be followed the day after?
16. How long should the school be concerned about student reaction?
17. How much grieving or "acting out" should be allowed?

18. Should students be involved in planning the school's response?
19. Who should organize and coordinate the school's response?
20. What about siblings or affected students in other schools?
21. What should teachers say to students in their classes?

## **Principles of Postvention**

Before presenting a plan to respond to the issues raised by these questions interrelated principles of postvention are outlined. It is on the principles of fear reduction, grief facilitation and the promotion of education that the postvention plan is based.

### **Reduce Fear**

Fear is the most overpowering and debilitating human emotion. Fear can cause us to flee in panic, act irrationally, become immobilized, say things we regret, and act in other ways that later are embarrassing to us. To deal with fear, we first recognize that fear breeds in the unknown. People are most afraid of what they don't understand, of mysterious, dark, different, unknown situations. The neighbor's German Shepherd running at you, riding the subway, driving to Toronto may each be scary the first time, but once you get to know the dog, have taken the subway a few times, or made the trip to Toronto often; you are much less afraid. Experience reduces the unknown and thereby reduces fear. An earthquake, especially resulting in death, produces so many unanswered questions, leaves so much unknown, and thus creates fear. What made it happen? Will it happen again? Is the school really safe? Am I safe at home? Will the next one get me? Why didn't God do something! Is there any place that's really safe?

As a result of so many unanswerable questions, the atmosphere in a school following an earthquake may be tinged with fear. Students and staff may feel unsure of themselves, confused, afraid of what else might happen, and not know how to behave or what to say.

Most of us grow up not thinking much about earthquakes. They only happen to other people, people we hear of or read about. It's hard to imagine that a major earthquake, especially one that kills people would ever happen to our friends, family, or community, and then when it does, many people feel insecure and afraid. Something that wasn't supposed to be part of God's plan, something that wasn't supposed to happen has happened and if that can happen then anything can happen.

An earthquake can pull the rug out from under basic beliefs about how the world is and leave us feeling unsure, unsafe, and wondering what we can count on with certainty. It's in this sense that an atmosphere of fear may prevail in a school the days following an earthquake. Of course, those friends and staff closest to those who may have died will be most affected; but the tragedy will effect everyone in the school to some extent.

It is very difficult for any constructive activity to take place when people are afraid. It's hard to concentrate, hard to take tests, write essays, or listen to lectures. It's even hard to feel sadness, remorse, or other normal grief feelings. Hence the reduction of fear is the first major goal for the school following a tragedy. We can't expect to eliminate it, but we can reduce it by reducing the unknowns.

While exercising sensitivity, we reduce fear by providing students and staff factual information about what happened, the deaths, and the grieving process to be expected in the days ahead by organizing the school day with as few changes as possible and by providing an open, accepting atmosphere allowing the "secret" fears, questions, and feelings of students and staff to come out.

### **Facilitate Grieving**

Grief is the normal, healthy, appropriate response to death or loss. Anyone who knew those that were killed is going to experience grief, from the parents whose bereavement will normally last 2 to 3 years to tangential acquaintances whose grief will be measured in days. Students and staff don't get a choice of whether to feel grief, but they *do* get to choose how they'll respond to it.

People who deny their grief, pretend it's not a big deal, or insist they're not going to let it bother them, or try to cover it up with bravado, laughter, or stoicism usually have a much harder time resolving their grief than do people who are able to grieve more expressively.

Each person grieves in his or her own way; a way that has been learned by experience with loss over the years. A student or staff member's way of grieving or coping with loss can be predicted (based on past experience with loss) and is not likely to change in the midst of a crisis like the aftermath of an earthquake.

Accordingly, a wide range of grieving behavior needs to be tolerated, e.g., screaming in anguish, pounding the lockers in anger, sobbing in the hallway, stunned silence, inability to answer even simple questions, seeming totally unaffected as if nothing happened, or saying as one boy did upon being told of his friend's death, "Good, now I don't have to pay him the ten bucks I owe him." (This last remark was made in shock and he spent the next month being attacked for it and apologizing over and over for it.)

The initial response of most people to learning that someone they know has died is shock. Shock is usually a numbness, feeling like in a fog or spacey during which the full impact of what's happened may not have sunk in. People in shock usually don't talk a lot and mostly need friends to be patient and not assume that they're unaffected just because they're not emotional.

Other reactions to be expected for some people following death are anxiety over what else might happen; anger at the person that died, e.g., for not heeding warnings; blame at someone for not doing something to save her; and perhaps guilt for surviving when he didn't. Naturally a sadness and feeling the loss will usually replace shock, anxiety and anger and remain as the major result of the death for a long time.

While each person's way of grieving needs to be accepted, people who can get their grief out by talking, crying, expressing anger or guilt, writing, reading, exercise, painting, music, etc. are usually better able to resolve their grief and in less time than those who can't or are not allowed to grieve. Thus, the school's postvention program needs to allow and encourage the natural expression of grief especially immediately after the tragedy, but also, for some students, in the weeks and months ahead.

In this vein, one of the most predictable and significant consequences of a tragedy is that it will unlock and trigger unresolved grief in many students and staff. That is, there will be a sadness in the school not only because a student has died, but because grief over people's previous losses will be activated. For example, the girl whose father drowned last year, the teacher whose miscarriage at 6 months no one would talk about, the boy whose mother has breast cancer, the custodian whose dad is deteriorating with Alzheimer's disease at a nursing home, the freshman whose parents are fighting out a bitter divorce all will be feeling both the effects of the tragedy and now even more intensely, the pain of their own life.

The school's postvention program must take into consideration both grief over previously unresolved losses and give high priority to facilitating the grieving process of students and staff.

### **Promote Education**

The purpose of a school is to educate its students and, (if Anna who says in The King and I, "by our students we'll be taught" is right) staff. Since we learn more from problems, crises, and tragedies than on average days; an earthquake will be an intense time of learning - not of reading and arithmetic, but of things perhaps more important.

The postvention program must be developed to promote constructive and useful learning in the aftermath of tragedy. Students and staff can be helped to learn how they react in a crisis, what people do that help most, how to help other people, what they really believe about death, that people can cry and still be strong, and, measured against the criterion of death, what's really important in life.

Obviously, no one wants a student to die; however, given the death has happened, learning is inevitably going to take place. The only question is, is the school going to allow it to occur haphazardly or will a postvention program be developed to promote constructive grieving, ways of helping others, and understanding of death and people in crisis?

## **POSTVENTION PLAN**

What follows is intended to be a practical step by step outline of the tasks to be accomplished in planning a school's response to tragedy. The planning process should begin, of course, long before the event occurs. It may be initiated by anyone recognizing the need for a postvention plan; however, the cooperation, support, and hopefully, leadership of key school personnel must be obtained before meaningful planning can take place. That is, the principal, superintendent,

and guidance staff clearly need to be involved and preferably also key teachers, coaches, school psychologists and social workers, nurses, and administrative assistants. Some involvement of an outside expert or consultant may be helpful at varying stages of the planning process. At times, in the process it is extremely important to consider the roles that custodians, secretaries, cafeteria workers, substitute teachers, bus drivers and student leaders may plan in the planning and/or implementation of the postvention program.

Each school needs to plan how it will carry out the 19 tasks outlined below. A report containing plans for how each task will be accomplished constitutes the postvention plan and should be available to all school personnel. It should be periodically reviewed especially by the administrative and guidance staff to update it (key resource people and phone numbers may change) and to keep copies of it at home as that's where the initial call about the tragedy may come.

To provide a context for the specific aspects of the postvention plan, we'll assume that the school day after the earthquake would begin with an emergency staff meeting before school followed by each faculty facilitating a short discussion of what has happened in the homeroom or first period class. Discussion of feelings about what's happened should be allowed to take as much class time as seems appropriate. A regular school schedule should be followed, but with great flexibility in allowing students to talk in the hallways, go to various individual and group counseling rooms provided, sit quietly in pairs on the stairway, be excused from tests and homework, etc. The structure of a regular school day provides some security and routine in a suddenly topsy turvy world while the wide latitude given students allows grief to be expressed. A variety of school and community personnel will be available to help students during the day. After school, a second general staff meeting is held to review the day and prepare for tomorrow.

1. **Selection of the Crisis Response Team.** A crisis response team of perhaps three to five members with authority to make decisions in the time of crisis needs to be chosen. The team is responsible for both planning and implementation of postvention. Among its members should be a staff who have some respect in the school, are sensitive to student and faculty needs, are committed to personal involvement in a crisis response, are able to be decisive, and who are relatively calm under fire. The crisis response team would conduct planning for the remaining tasks and, along with the building principal if he or she is not on the team, be responsible for carrying out the school's response to a suicidal death on the days succeeding it.
2. **Identification of Media Liaison Person.** One person within the school district should be designated to handle all contact with newspaper, television, radio, and magazine reporters and shield school personnel from media intrusion. Media personnel should not be allowed in school. All school students and staff should be firmly instructed to refer any phone or personal contact, whether in school or at home, to the media liaison person whose phone number should be readily available and who should receive instructions on what information to release from the crisis response team. A press release should be prepared to serve as a basis for talking with the media. In general, the less publicity death receives, the better.

3. **Identification of Family Liaison Person.** The crisis response team should designate a representative of the school to initiate immediate and appropriate contact with the family of the dead student, to express the empathy and concern of the school, to answer parents questions regarding school plans, to ascertain family wishes and plans regarding funeral, wake and memorials, to discretely obtain the information about the death and the circumstances surrounding it, and to offer to help the family with support, contact with community resources, or perhaps tangible help like driving, food, babysitting, or talking with siblings. The family liaison person should be educated about helpful and unhelpful responses to grieving people, be sensitive to family privacy, and use intuition about maintaining some contact with the family during the weeks ahead. The crisis response team may choose one family liaison person for all situations or a different one may be designated for each crisis based on the person's relationship to the deceased student or his/her family.
4. **Organization of Staff/Telephone Network.** A telephone network or tree should be developed wherein each school staff member is called as soon as possible after the incident has occurred, given the brief basic facts, and notified of the time and place of the emergency staff meeting to be held usually before the next school day. Care should be taken to reach not only faculty, but all auxiliary and related personnel as well. Furthermore, selected staff members in schools throughout the district should be notified particularly in schools attended by siblings or schools from which support staff may be borrowed to help during the crisis.
5. **Identification of Crisis Consultant.** Despite the expertise and capabilities of school staff, it is recommended that a consultant from outside the school be chosen with whom an agreement is developed to offer assistance to the school in the event of a tragedy. The principal, guidance counselor, or most experienced member of the crisis response team may know the student who has died and thus be personally affected by the death making it difficult for him or her to play their usual leadership role. Additionally, trained experts in grief or trauma are probably more experienced in coping with tragedy and knowing what helps in time of crisis than most school staff. The role of the consultant should be to assist with or review the postvention plan with the crisis response team, address the emergency staff meeting, generally be available for intervention or feedback during postvention, and to support school staff during the crisis.
6. **Identification of Community Response People.** Experienced counselors, psychiatrists, clergymen, psychologists, or social workers from the community should be identified and contacted ahead of time to ascertain their availability and willingness to help in one or both of two ways: first, to come to the school on the day after the tragedy and be available to talk with students needing support or counseling; and second, to agree to see professionally and immediately or as appropriate, students or staff referred by the school. Lists of these professionals should be clearly posted in school on the days following the death.



7. **Develop Suggestions for Classroom Discussion.** During either the homeroom or first class period, whichever is longer, each teacher should announce to the students what has happened, give the pertinent facts about the tragedy in a low key, unsensational manner, describe the schedule for the day and mention the people and places in school where help is available. The purpose is to ground the students in reality, reduce rumors and gossip, provide an accurate basis for discussion and grieving, and assure the students that help is here if they need it. Once the students are informed, the teacher should allow for and facilitate a discussion encouraging students to share their reactions, thoughts and feelings to what's happened recognizing that, while many students will have heard about the death before, others may not have known until the teacher announced it.

Some schools prefer the equally acceptable plan of having the principal make a brief announcement of the death at the time of morning announcements after which the teachers will add some information and lead class discussion. Tragic news is usually best delivered by the person with most authority.

Since following the announcement of the death, however it is made, the classroom teacher will facilitate student discussion which will be a new and difficult experience for most teachers; the crisis response team should develop and distribute guidelines for conducting such a discussion. An in-service training session should be devoted to explaining the postvention plan and suggestions for facilitating class discussion ought to be the main focus of that training. Some guidelines for such a discussion are offered at the end of this paper.

8. **Identification of Crisis Center and Counseling Room.** One room with a telephone needs to be set up as a general headquarters and information center. Someone, perhaps the principal's secretary, the media liaison person, or a member of the crisis response team, should be designated to be in that room at all times during the day after the tragedy to relay information and answer questions on how to locate the principal, superintendent, school nurse, school psychologist, crisis response team, etc.

Additionally, rooms should be set aside and their existence clearly publicized the day after the earthquake for individual and small group counseling or where students can go to talk and not be alone. Each room should be manned by a school or community resource person. One of these rooms, though loosely supervised by a staff member, may be designated as a quiet or respite room where a student can go to be alone and silent.

9. **Formulation of School Policy on Funerals.** Wakes, funerals, and other rituals around death usually serve a useful purpose in acknowledging and accepting the death, beginning the grieving process and letting people know they're not alone. The crisis response team needs to formulate a school policy on funerals which addresses questions like: Will the school be closed for the funeral? Will staff and/or students be given permission to attend the funeral? Will notes from parents be required for students to attend the funeral or

memorial service? Will the school provide bus transportation to the funeral? Will students the funeral be handled? Will any in-school memorial services be held?

Each school needs to answer these questions for themselves. Our general suggestions are to allow or even encourage students and staff to attend the funeral - the students, preferably, with parental permission. It is best, nonetheless, to run a "regular school schedule" and not usually offer special transportation to the service. Penalties to students in the days after the death should be few and, in most cases, the school is better off not setting up its own memorial service.

Special arrangements may need to be made in the hopefully rare, but very troublesome, instance when the family has no wake, a closed funeral, or no funeral at all. In such cases, the school may need to organize or at least allow some special memorial service to take place.

10. **Formulation of Policy on School Memorial.** The crisis response team, perhaps in conjunction with student leaders, needs to formulate a policy on what sort of memorial is appropriate to pay tribute to the person who has died. Will the flag be flown at half mast? Will a special page be set aside in the yearbook and who will write it? Will parents be consulted about a memorial? Does the class of the student who died want to establish a scholarship in the student's memory? Will a special event like a swim meet, school play, or class day be dedicated to the deceased student? Will a plaque be placed in the school? Will a tree be planted in the student's name?

The implementation of this policy on memorials is an excellent place to involve students and can provide a task which helps them channel their grief into a constructive goal while giving them a reason to come together which may allow them to share with and support each other. It is often best to invite those students closest to the deceased student to plan the memorial to that student.

11. **Interface with Student Leaders.** Postvention is best handled by the school staff and community people, but the crisis response team should consider what role student leaders could play. Should there be a student member of the crisis response team? If there is a peer counseling program established, how will peer counselors be involved in the aftermath? This is not to say that student leaders should have a role in postvention; rather it is to ask the crisis response team to consider whether they should, and if so, in what way.
12. **Availability of Readings on Death.** Many people affected by death find great comfort or help in reading about the grieving process, other people's experience with death, death itself, or suggestions on how to be helpful to their friends in a time of crisis. Accordingly, the school librarian should be prepared to place on an easily accessed table or counter, a number of books or pamphlets on death, grief, and earthquakes to be readily available for those students and staff who may find them helpful.

13. **Plan for Calling in Substitute Teachers.** Owing to their own grief or personal difficulties with death, some teachers may be unable to function normally, let alone help with student reaction. This, coupled with the difficulty in predicting the extent of student needs, leads to the suggestion that the crisis response team develop a plan for calling in a number of substitute teachers who will be available to fill in, in whatever ways the day's events dictate. Perhaps they won't be needed, but their presence will allow flexibility in use of school resources to meet student needs.
14. **Plan for Morning After Staff Meeting.** The school day following the tragedy should begin with an emergency meeting of *all* school staff, teachers, custodians, nurses, counselors, administrators, substitute teachers, cafeteria workers, resource room volunteers, etc. and including the community resource people. A half-hour to 45 minutes should be allowed for this meeting which should take place before the normal start of the school day. The meeting has two purposes, the first handled by the building principal, the second by the crisis consultant.

The principal should begin the meeting by announcing what has happened, giving as much information about damage, death, funerals, and family wishes as possible. Staff will function best if they're well informed. Succinct staff questions should be answered and the plan for the day should be spelled out including introduction of community resource people, media and family liaison people, and crisis response team, location of the crisis center room and counseling rooms, and plans for the after school staff meeting.

The crisis consultant will then address the group on what to expect from and how to respond to students, what to say in the homeroom or first class, special issues raised by the earthquake, and the importance of paying attention to the staff members own feelings and reactions about the death.

15. **Identification and Contact with At-Risk Students.** Through the telephone networking and other channels, the crisis response team should make an intense effort to identify two kinds of at-risk kids: boyfriends, girlfriends, and close friends of the dead student and students who are known to be very depressed, under great stress, or readily set off for other reasons.

Each identified student should be contacted sensitively and privately by a school staff member to assess his/her current state, let the student know someone cares, and offer individual counseling or support at any point in the day and days that follow. If serious cause for concern is detected, the student's parents may be notified to hopefully insure their support. In certain instances, the at-risk student's closest friend or friends may be notified for the same reason.

Additionally, those close friends of the deceased student may be invited and encouraged to meet as a group with a trained counselor to share their feelings, facilitate their grief, and feel their mutual support

16. **Drafting a Letter for Parents.** During the school day, a letter to parents should be drafted so it can be sent home with the students. The letter should sensitively and succinctly state what has happened, how the school has responded thus far, plans the school has for the coming days, suggestions on being especially aware of and supportive to their child, names and phone numbers of community resources to call for information or help and contain an announcement of the parent/community meeting.
17. **Plan for After School Staff Meeting.** At the close of the first school day after the tragedy, a second staff meeting should be held for *all* school staff. The meeting may be led by the principal or the crisis response team. The purpose is to review the day's events attending to what went well and what didn't, identify which students/staff are most worried about and how to help them, make any needed adjustments in the postvention plan, enunciate continuing postvention plans, and allow staff to raise questions for the crisis consultant or response team.
18. **Plan for Evening Parent/Community Meeting.** Plans for a parent/community meeting to be held a day or two after the funeral should be formed by the crisis response team. Experience shows that such a meeting may be more important in a small or isolated community. The principal, crisis response team, and crisis consultant should speak at the meeting with the crisis consultant bearing the brunt of the load and emphasizing what to expect during the grieving process and how to be helpful to students and adults affected by the earthquake. While such a meeting is not essential, it usually is helpful to community people even if not directly affected by the tragedy and allows the school to perform a constructive community service.
19. **Plan for Postvention Evaluation.** After the crisis is over, usually a few weeks following the tragedy, there will still be some students and perhaps staff who will be grieving deeply and need support or counseling for some time to come. However, for most of the school, life will be more or less back to normal. During the time after the crisis, the crisis response team needs to organize a meeting of those staff most directly involved in postvention to discuss and evaluate the postvention process. Prior to the meeting, feedback should be solicited from other people who were involved in postvention. This information can be fed into the postvention evaluation meeting. Of course, the purpose of the meeting is to ascertain what worked well and what didn't, what modifications in the postvention plan are needed, and to thank or give feedback to those who helped the school cope with the crisis.

### THE ISSUE OF STAFF GRIEF

Responsibility for carrying out the postvention plan is on the shoulders of various school staff members some of whom will have known, perhaps been close to, the student who died. Other key staff may be experiencing painful turmoil in their own lives. A student's death will cast grief over the school. The staff will be trying to help students cope with grief. The first principle of grief work is to be aware of and pay attention to one's own grieving process. The nature and

strength of a teacher's feelings will effect, perhaps to help, perhaps to interfere with, student's grief.

Therefore, to best prepare for postvention following a death, the crisis response team, cognizant of staff being (intended or not) role models for student grief, should organize an in-service training day focusing on the losses, grieving styles, coping mechanisms, and feelings about death experienced by staff members. The in-service should contain two sessions, one didactic and the other experiential, and be conducted by the crisis consultant.

The didactic portion should consist of an explanation of grief and the process people go through when a loved one dies. Issues such as how long the grieving process may take, phases one goes through, feelings of going crazy as a normal part of grief, what helps and what to say to people in grief, and especially the influence of coping with past losses or current reaction to death should be discussed.

Experientially, the session should help people become aware of their own grieving process; their own unique ways of coping with loss and death. In pairs, triads or small groups each person may be asked to think back over his/her life about the losses he/she suffered (to death or otherwise), to describe one or two of these losses, share how he/she reacted, coped and grieved at those times, and recall what helped or didn't help.

There are two reasons for this exercise. First, people grieve a current death in much the way they've grieved other losses in their lives. When death occurs, people don't leisurely decide how they're going to grieve; they react immediately and begin to respond the only way they know how, the way they've learned over years of coping with losses. People don't change their style of grieving in a crisis; so focusing on one's grieving style will provide a good indication of how that person will react when a student death occurs. Thus, staff can know what to expect from themselves and what they'll need in the crisis.

Second, people have a tendency to judge others through their own eyes and, hence, assume that other people will or should react to and grieve the death the way they do. This tendency is nearly always unhelpful and interferes with a staff member's ability to respond to student or other staff needs following the earthquake. Awareness of one's own grieving tendency makes it more likely that he/she can set that tendency aside for a time and be open to helping other people cope in their own way.

Knowledge about grief in general and one's own grief in particular, will increase the self-confidence of staff members, thus enabling them to talk with, listen to, and help students in the aftermath of an earthquake.

## **SUGGESTIONS ON LEADING CLASS DISCUSSION OF DEATH**

One or more of three paths can be followed in leading a class discussion following the death of a student. First, mention in a kind and sensitive way what has happened and then simply open the

floor for whatever anyone wants to say by saying something like: "This has come as such a shock to all of us. It's so hard to believe. Do any of you have any reactions or feelings or thoughts about \_\_\_\_\_'s death?" If it's a vocal group or emotions are high, this simple offer may be all that's needed for students to begin sharing their reactions.

Second, reference can be made to some aspect of the crisis and specific questions can be directed to the class about the concern. For example, the teacher can mention that the funeral will be at 1:00 p.m. tomorrow and that any student who wishes to, may attend; then follow this by asking, "How many of you have ever been to a funeral?" and asking some of those with their hands up whose funeral they went to and what it was like, was the casket open, what did people say at the funeral, etc. This more direct cognitive approach may be easier for some students to respond to. The teacher may choose to share his or her funeral experience with the class as well.

Third, depending on the teacher's own state of mind or his/her assessment of the mood of the class, the teacher may express his/her own emotional reaction in a very feeling way to the class and perhaps be silent for a moment afterwards to see if it triggers any student response. For example, a teacher may say something like, "I was 12 years old when my dad died. I was so scared I could hardly talk, but all I could think of was 'I better not cry because my mother's going to need me to take care of my little sister,'" etc. or "Last night when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ called to tell me what had happened, I thought he was joking and said 'If you think this is funny, you're wrong!' When I realized he was serious, I hung up the phone, slammed my fist on the table, and thought, 'What a rotten thing to happen.' I couldn't get to sleep wondering all night what was going through her mind as she died and I kept getting sadder and sadder."

Emotion begets emotion. A genuine, honest heartfelt response by a teacher will be more likely to elicit an emotional response in a student than will a cognitive or light response. Death is a great leveler. Neither teacher nor student fully understands it, has an answer for it, nor knows how to make it better. Though used to being cast in the role of expert, few teachers are expert on death; so it's phony to try and play that role. It's far better to be human with your students, showing your feelings if you can, and modeling that it's "OK" to be upset or grieve when someone dies.

Being only human, some teachers may know themselves well enough to realize they are simply unable to lead a class discussion on death, in which case, they may ask a counselor or someone to come to their class and take over the discussion.