

A lot of us are experiencing some level of grief in the past year, we may have lost our family or friends to COVID or we have lost the time spending in campus, the time to socialize with friends, the opportunities to go out to the nature or even just to follow the normal routine ... etc. Brittany R. Collins shared with us some tips to get through grief, let's check it out and regather ourselves in this challenging time.



Five Ways to Help Students Get Through Grief Students in almost every classroom are experiencing grief—and it's affecting their learning.

BY BRITTANY R. COLLINS | MARCH 11, 2022

In the fall of 2021, the Centers for Disease Control released a study that highlighted the ways in which grief and inequity are intertwined.

Among the more than 140,000 children who had lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19 in the United States (numbers that do not reflect the more recent Omicron surge), Indigenous children were “4.5 times more likely to lose a parent or grandparent caregiver, Black children were 2.4 times more likely, and Hispanic children were nearly 2 times more likely” than white children.

Loss influences learning and cognition, as brain-based changes cast ripple effects throughout one’s body and behavior. For example, “If someone close to us dies . . . based on what we know about object-trace cells, our neurons still fire every time we expect our loved one to be in the room,” writes psychology professor Mary-Frances O’Connor. Grief causes a fight-or-flight stress response, as well as a depressive response, confirms neurologist Lisa Shulman. Since stress hormones dampen the functioning of the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain that holds primary responsibility for higher-order functioning like impulse control, emotional regulation, and planning ahead—people of any age may have a harder time with executive functioning skills or memory-related tasks at work or school, especially when, as in adolescence, their prefrontal cortex is still in development.

Grief is not only experienced in response to a death but can also occur as a result of other forms of loss—a change in housing or schooling, a sibling moving away to college, a parental divorce, experiences in the foster system, or losing touch with friends as school buildings open and close in response to pandemic surges, among other examples. When we “zoom out” from death-related statistics to consider the myriad forms of losses experienced by young people, it seems feasible to assume that nearly every classroom comprises students (and teachers) who are grieving.

For the past three years, I have interviewed teachers, school counselors, and social workers for my new book, *Learning from Loss*. Through my research, I came to identify five approaches to helping students heal from grief and loss. Here's how you might apply them in your own classroom.

1. Create opportunities for self-awareness and reflection

Teachers should never force students to self-disclose regarding their loss experiences—but they can create environments that promote habits of mind that buoy young people experiencing grief.

“To climb out of survival mode, it is helpful for students to identify the feelings, name the function of their brain, and attune to their biology,” write trauma-informed educators Kristin Souers and Pete Hall in their 2016 book *Fostering Resilient Learners*. To encourage reflection in the classroom, they suggest teaching students about the sympathetic nervous system (which controls the fight-or-flight response) and parasympathetic nervous system (the “rest and digest” part of the nervous system that promotes a sense of calm). It can be helpful, especially with younger students, to refer to these parts of the nervous system as the “upstairs brain” and “downstairs brain,” terms coined by psychologist Dan Siegel.

Grief and loss can throw us into our “downstairs brain,” or sympathetic nervous system, meaning our stress response can get stuck in overdrive and cause changes in our bodies (headaches, nausea, fast heart rate, sweaty palms, etc.) and behavior (outbursts, avoidance, connection-seeking, among many others). Though it is important not to stigmatize the downstairs brain or suggest that students should suppress challenging emotions, we can consider how to acknowledge that both the upstairs and downstairs brain signal important information about our experiences and surroundings. Then, we can invite students to brainstorm strategies that help them access their upstairs brains when they need to.

For example, teachers could invite students to make a list of activities that make them feel most like themselves or ask them who or what makes them feel calm, supported, or peaceful. Teachers can invite them to write and return to these lists of strategies when they are struggling with “downstairs brain”—not because those states of being are bad, but because, when we take the time to identify resources and activities that support our well-being in times of adversity, we can help restore a sense of agency that is often lacking in the context of grief.

2. Foster connections with nature and community

There is much research highlighting the healing powers of nature for folks experiencing grief and trauma. One 2016 study from UC Berkeley, for example, highlights the ways in which white-water rafting trips attenuated symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in both veterans and teens labeled “at-risk.” Renowned neurologist and author Oliver Sacks has written, in “The Healing Power of Gardens” and elsewhere, about the restorative powers of nature. And another recent study found that time spent near water directly improved physical and psychological health.

To leverage the wellness-centered benefits of nature in the learning environment, teachers can consider opportunities for pursuing place-based learning and connecting curricula to the natural world. If you have

access to an outdoor location, consider how you might incorporate elements of nature into a science experiment; take students outdoors to write or study nature poetry; or use topographical maps to trace their school grounds in social studies or geography. Better yet, consider how to make space for moments of mindfulness in nature—paying attention to the sensory cues (sight, smell, touch, taste, sound) through guided writing or drawing activities, or practicing meditation to further promote regulation and “upstairs brain” functioning. These activities won’t just help students to navigate difficult emotions; they’re a way to foster stewardship for the environment.

If you don’t have access to nature or do not have the supports or resources to facilitate these types of learning experiences, consider how nature-based videos or images might facilitate similar exercises in the classroom. Scientists have suggested that one need not be in nature, but can simply view images of it, to lower blood pressure and improve physiological well-being.

3. Empower student agency through project-based learning

Trauma occurs when we feel a loss of control over our situation or surroundings, as neurologist Bessel van der Kolk writes in *The Body Keeps the Score*. Grief can also make us feel helpless, and can drive feelings of isolation.

Project-based learning, or PBL, can potentially help students regain a sense of control while possibly breaking down barriers with other students.

Why does that work? Because project-based learning allows students a level of choice in what and how they learn; for example, by incorporating passion projects into curricula, allowing for choice in reading assignments or book groups, inviting students to teach the class a favorite skill or activity, or pursuing original student inquiries within (and across) curricula. These activities promote Richard Ryan and Edward Deci’s tenets of self-determination theory: competence, relatedness, and autonomy, all of which are at stake when a student is grieving. Many of these activities also help students to connect with other students, which might help them overcome feelings of isolation.

For more resources related to inquiry- and project-based learning, check out research and work by Sara K. Ahmed and Harvey “Smokey” Daniels.

4. Find moments for facilitating “flow”

Positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow describes “those moments when you’re completely absorbed in a challenging but doable task.”

Because grief activates the “downstairs brain,” it may also make people of any age more prone to risk taking (especially in the context of adolescence, a developmental moment that already promotes risk taking). Leveraging risk-taking impulses by connecting students with opportunities for “healthy risk taking” increases the likelihood that grieving students will discover activities and practices that promote coping and facilitate flow in activities like theater, soccer, the debate team, and community service.

Group activities that create possibilities for flow might further promote well-being by widening students' worlds of connection, a tenet of trauma-informed care.

5. Model self-care and healthy habits

At this writing, almost a million people have died of COVID-19 in the space of just two years. At a moment like this one, it is critical to recognize that teachers and colleagues are grieving alongside their students—not just for lost lives, but also for lost friends, cancelled milestones and celebrations, and academic opportunities.

Additionally, caring professionals who are routinely exposed to others' stories and experiences of loss or trauma may develop “compassion fatigue,” a neurological response that parallels post-traumatic stress and activates the “downstairs brain” in ways that may negatively affect physical and psychological well-being.

For this reason, teachers working with grieving students should consider how to model healthy coping mechanisms by explicitly incorporating activities that support regulation and well-being into the classroom—and then practicing those activities, from mindfulness to boundary-setting to journaling, alongside their students. Not only does such an approach normalize conversations about grief, loss, and mental health with young people while modeling self-awareness, it also carves time into the classroom routine for promoting opportunities to pause and fostering well-being in educators, too.