



Grief & Loss in Schools

Grief and Loss Across Cultures

Grief is...a normal emotion, with significant differences to be expected from one culture to another...

Averill and Nunley
Handbook of Bereavement

To be “culturally competent” is to be respectful of differences among people and to recognize the significance of cultural-based practices, values, beliefs, expectations, and experiences of each person. While it is important to understand cultural difference, remember that even within a culture, individuals will respond uniquely to grief and loss.

Rather than trying to become an expert on each culture, apply a “universal protocol”:

- ◆ **Be Authentic:** Don’t pretend to be an expert on a person’s culture or religion. If you would like to learn more about the person’s cultural beliefs and practices, you may be able to ask directly. Talking to someone else from this culture may be helpful as well.
- ◆ **Be Non-Judgmental:** You may experience inner reactions to what you are seeing and hearing, particularly if belief systems are different from your own. Don’t let your beliefs, values and opinions get in the way.

What to Look For and What to Ask

When working with families of differing cultures, be alert and sensitive to the following dynamics within the culture and the family:

- ◆ Beliefs and attitudes toward life, death and the hereafter
- ◆ How pain, suffering and grief are expressed
- ◆ Expectations and responsibilities of family members
- ◆ Rituals that are followed when someone is sick, dying, or has died
- ◆ Possible stigma associated with certain types of deaths (e.g., suicide)

Remember, sometimes the only way to learn is to ask questions. Be sensitive, however, in asking them. Consider the family’s readiness to address these questions.