

When death, tragedy and tears come to school

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Death of parents, classmates or even pets can stir grief in children but, within their communities, schools can also have murder, suicide, family violence and one-off tragedies. How do schools help their students cope with grief?

University student Dani Rothwell was 16 when she lost her classmate to suicide. The two weren't best friends but they shared some classes for nearly two years, and Rothwell's mother became concerned enough about her daughter's wellbeing that she sent her to a psychologist to help process the grief.

It was the school holidays when Rothwell learned via Facebook that her classmate had committed suicide a few days before. When she returned to school the next term, she says she was struck by the brevity of the announcement at the first school assembly.



Young hearts: children are exposed to death and grief through family and school but they are also affected by public tragedies such as the Lindt cafe siege and deaths. *Brendon Thorne*

"Our headmaster got up at assembly and said, 'I'm sure you're all aware that some events have occurred over the break,' and that, 'If you need any help in dealing with this, there is some help available on campus.'

"There was no mention of suicide; there was no mention of grief or depression or anything."

Suicide is one of a number of death-related events that impact on the incidence of grief experienced in Australian schools (the 2010 ABS figures indicate one in 20 of Australians under 18 will experience the death of a parent and there were close to an average of 2500 suicides annually in Australia between 2009-2013) but school communities are also plunged into grief after events of family violence, separation/divorce (one in four school kids will go through divorce or separation), family illness and pet loss.

And that does not even address students' feelings of grief, fear, loss and anxiety prompted by tragedies they become aware of through

the media or through their families or social media connections.

In the past year alone, there has been the Lindt cafe siege and the death of a young mother; the murder of eight children in Cairns; the death of three children who drowned at Wyndham Vale; the death of three Perth children on Malaysian airlines flight 17 and the murder of young NSW teacher Stephanie Scott. All have affected particular school communities closely but many students in distant schools will be more aware, since publicity about these deaths, of the possibility of tragedy and loss in their own lives.

Chris Hall, CEO of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, says school communities are idiosyncratic in the way they respond to grief.

"Each school community has its own personality," says Hall. "They have their own sorts of relationships with mental health providers internally and externally. They also have different leaders who approach these eventful incidences with very different approaches. We certainly have some principals who are sensitised to the impact of these events and will mobilise and support not just the students but the staff too.

"Clearly, on the curve, there are also principals who tend not to address these issues."

Rothwell's high school was one of a number the media reported on a few years back as it deliberated over how to broach the subject of suicide in the school community after a cluster of student suicides in the district.

Grief is masked

Some grief is masked by more silence than other. Catherine Cini,

CEO of grief helpline service Griefline, says the school students referred to her often mask their grief at school. The girls typically do so by withdrawing from school. The boys affected often exhibit bad behaviour at school such as calling out, bullying and showing up late.

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Catherine Cini, CEO of Griefline

"I don't ask them if they cry," says Cini of the young children she sees, "I ask them where they cry, and they're very quick to tell you where they cry. Often, under the bed or in the cupboard or places like that."

Griefline runs a children's program designed to support and encourage people aged four to 18 to recognise and express dormant, overwhelming or concerning emotions that manifest out of loss and grief. Cini remembers seeing one boy, barely past prep, who arrived with the principal after his extreme misbehaviour in the playground became too problematic to manage within the school. The boy's parents joined the sessions too and Cini began to uncover the depths of the problem.

"I was telling him a little bit about what counselling is and what we'd be doing and he said, 'Well Catherine, I've brought them here and now you'll have to fix it.' I said, 'What is it you want me to fix?' He said, 'You'll have to tell dad to stop hitting mum.'"

In Victorian schools, grief support takes many forms. It can be built into the curriculum and teacher training. It can be facilitated through psychologists working as student support services officers. Grief and bereavement support specialists such as Good Grief and the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement offer schools grief education and support. And mental health services available through Headspace and Mind Matters add another layer of support for students who are adversely affected.

None of the experts contacted for this story could identify any current research specifically measuring the impact external grief support services at large are having on Victorian schools but many service providers such as the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – the statewide specialist in bereavement service – are informed by evidence-based practice and many mentioned have been rated as best-practice programs.

Good Grief, operator of grief support program Seasons for Growth, commissioned Southern Cross University to evaluate its program in 2010, finding various positives including data stating that parents and companions deemed the program valuable.

Improve emotional well being

At Darley Primary School in Bacchus Marsh, wellbeing officer Sharon Sperling operates a suite of programs that provide support to students experiencing grief. Seasons for Growth is one of these. It's an eight-week program (one hour per week) intended to develop the social and emotional well being of children and young people (aged 6-18) experiencing significant loss or change.

"I'm not sure if the topics of death and grief have become so mainstream that they are openly discussed as a class yet, but by

offering this program, it allows children, families and teachers to begin the conversation," says Sperling.

In May, beyondblue announced the redevelopment of MindMatters, the national mental health promotion and prevention initiative for secondary schools. The announcement coincided with the release of a new beyondblue survey of teachers and principals that reports around 50 per cent of them say the demands of teaching don't allow educators time to meet the mental health needs of their students.

Hall says schools that exemplify best-practice in grief management typically have existing policy around the management of events. Their staff know what their roles are in events and critical incidents and they are trained to respond. Grief is also ideally managed from the inside of the school.

"I think it is also very valuable to have a principal that has emotional literacy," says Hall. "Often, in the best examples, we have school leaders who are able to manage the anxiety that these events can produce and readily move to a point where they can restore a sense of safety but also acknowledge these are events that have impacts on staff."

This February, Flinders Christian Community College in Tyabb held a private memorial to mark the one-year anniversary of Luke Batty's murder at the hands of his father. The school's executive principal Cameron Pearce says the school has transformed in various ways as an outcome of processing the loss of their student.

"It's probably heightened the importance of ensuring students are equipped with the appropriate social and emotional intelligence to be able to respond to situations and tragedies....

"As a result, we increased effort into those areas to not only ensure our students are equipped with those social and emotional skills but also that staff are as well, so they have the professional development and support to be able to coach and mentor students in those areas."

Dani Rothwell, now Victorian young Labor junior vice-president and president of the Monash Union of Berwick Students, is also an active young people's mental health campaigner whose lobbying was integral to a new Headspace Centre opening in Narre Warren this May. She says the more opportunities available for young people to have a dialogue about events causing them grief the better.

"I think at school we see people and we think they might be a bit down or a bit stressed but I think when we're at school, you don't really think that it could be as bad as them being suicidal.

"You don't think they might be on medication or they might be seeing a psychiatrist. Once we develop an awareness that mental ill-health is quite prominent in society and it actually does start occurring when you're a teenager or even younger, those conversations should start becoming easier," Rothwell says.

[GriefLine](#)

[Beyond Blue](#)

[Seasons for Growth program](#)

[Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#)