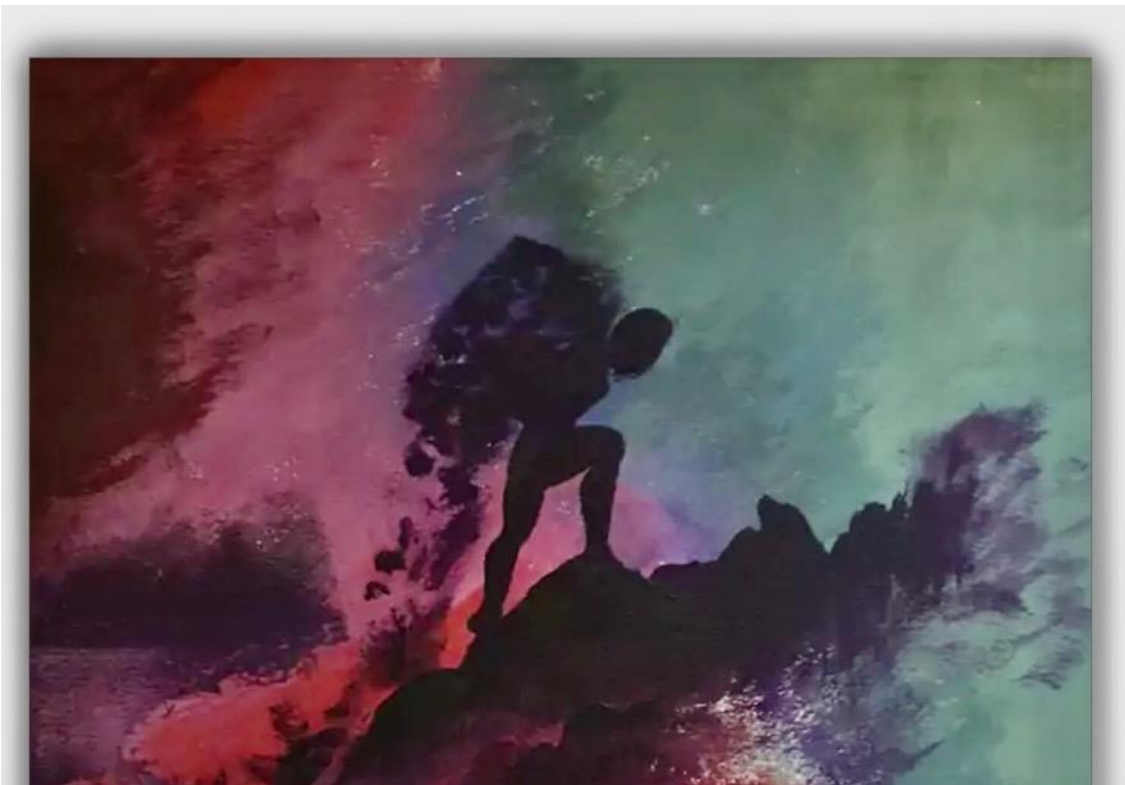


Responding to GRIEF AND LOSS in Afterschool Programs

A Briefing Paper



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND EDITORS

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EDITORS

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who organizations, and policy makers. The How Kids Learn Foundation (HKL) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs.

The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities that promote the capacity of organizations that support the education and healthy development of youth. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.).

The **Grief-Responsive Teaching** website, founded by Brittany Collins, is a professional learning community and resource hub that supports young peoples' and adult staffs' well-being in times of loss.

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Source: Artwork by Lauren Coakley

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing awareness of the importance of emotional regulation, social emotional learning, trauma informed practice and healing centered engagement, yet rarely is grief included in the conversation. It is important that we understand more about the needs of youth who are grieving or experiencing loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic (deaths and illness, as well as the loss of “normal”), the opioid crisis, the rising gun and racial violence that is plaguing the country. Western society’s cultural aversion to discussing the topic of death intensifies the chasm that loss can create between young people and adult staff, causing and compounding the lack of discourses around bereavement in professional preparation and development of youth workers or educators.

“I wish teachers received more education/training when it comes to students’ mental health- turning in late-not being lazy, sleepy in class-not bored-maybe not sleeping well. More training when it comes to dealing with things outside of classroom-like the quarantine.... not enough understanding about how hard this is on the students.” – Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview for afterschool leaders on the issues of grief and loss experienced by young people, grief-responsive teaching, and related program strategies. It is not our intent to pathologize young people as they are both strong and resilient. Rather, our intent is to expand the awareness of people’s experiences of grief and loss and use this as a lens to look at our program responses.



WHAT WE MEAN BY GRIEF

“Grief is the natural reaction to loss. It is both a universal and a personal experience.... It is a strong, sometimes overwhelming emotion for people, regardless of whether their sadness stems from the loss of a loved one or is the experience that results when something or someone you love is lost,” (Mayo Clinic 2022).

“Trauma happens in almost everyone’s life so having a way to deal with that at school would be helpful.”- Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

Many educators and youth program leaders realize that loss has a significant impact on young people, especially when grief intersects with inequity: from domestic violence to gun violence to police brutality, loss is bound to socioeconomic and racial disparities in communities across the nation—a confluence that existed long before the pandemic underscored the injustices that position certain populations for the privileges of health and wellbeing, and others for the experiences of illness, grief, and bereavement (CDC 2021).

PREVALENCE

The presence of loss in learning environments is not a new phenomenon. In 2015, 7 out of 10 teachers had a young person in their classroom who was grieving (Nadworny 2015). Now, that number has likely risen, as 1.5 million children have lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19 worldwide, over 140,000 in the U.S. alone (Levin 2021).



Prior to the start of the pandemic, approximately 1 in 14 children lost a parent or sibling before their 18th birthday (Gunner n.d.). For years, educators and youth workers have not felt equipped to support young people through this widespread grief. According to one 2012 survey, fewer than 1 percent of teachers received training related to grief support during their preservice training, and only 3 percent of teachers reported access to grief-related professional development in their district (Densen, Lansworth & Siegel 2012).

In the summer of 2020, the American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation conducted a survey that found: 26% of teacher respondents had already lost a member of their school community to COVID-19, 75% cited COVID-19 as a critical catalyst in their recognizing “the immense impact of grief and loss” in school, and 84% were awakened to “the impact of ‘non-death related losses on the young people they serve” (Densen et al. 2020). We are also seeing that Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) youth are facing much higher rates of bereavement due to systemic health inequities (CDC 2021).

Of course, these statistics relate only to grief that is experienced in response to a physical death. Some other forms and causes of grief are described below and are rife in this pandemic moment.



Source: Quilt of Tears

OTHER FORMS OF GRIEF AND LOSS

There are many other kinds of losses that do not involve death and that can elicit a grief response in our brains and bodies. Many are prevalent due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"After my brother died, life was so hard to live. There were days that I sat there and I didn't think I could live anymore without my brother. Whenever a birthday, holiday or special occasion would come along, I would always end up shedding at least a few tears. Nothing was the same without my brother." —Jenniffer, 16 (Children's Grief Awareness Day).

Youth and adults can experience **Secondary Traumatic Stress** (STS), which is "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another" (Peterson 2018). Its symptoms align closely with those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can result in cognitive, physical, behavioral, and emotional challenges, from hypervigilance to preoccupation, apathy to impaired immunity (Administration for Children & Families 2021).

Living Losses are forms of loss such as those associated with divorce, housing insecurity, foster care, or a familial falling out. **Disenfranchised Grief** is grief that is not socially or societally acknowledged, such as generational grief and trauma tied to inequity. Both forms of grief abound in this pandemic, albeit in less trackable ways than those tied directly to COVID-related death. Youth and adults can also experience **Anticipatory Grief** in expectancy of a loss and **Vicarious Grief** when exposed to others' losses.

Generational Grief/Trauma can impact youth from communities that have historically faced brutality and loss; for example, when we think about the deep roots of racial violence across history, and vicarious grief and trauma for folks of the global majority who see acts of racialized violence committed against those with similar identities, there is grief for those lost; anticipatory grief about who might be impacted next, and generational grief. This isn't just conceptual; there is much scientific research that explores and explains the ways in which racial violence, discrimination, and bigotry impact the brain and body (Mental Health America 2022). Race-based traumatic stress is a public health crisis.

"I worry about my Asian family. My Mom has experienced racism in the past and I really worry about the racism especially towards older people. They don't really know how to protect themselves. Especially since the violence at the capital and the radical right viewpoints, it makes me feel like some people think the violence is okay." – Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

These myriad losses, whether or not they are tied to a death, can produce physiological grief responses; for example, COVID pandemic fears may result in anticipatory grief regarding one's own or a loved one's health and/or mortality. Or they may involve other forms of living losses, like those caused by a lack of proximity to friends and loved ones; grief for our former life/way of living; grief for growth milestones missed, like a prom or graduation, wedding or job transition – "the loss of 'normal.'" These are just several examples, and when we take them into consideration, the rates of young people impacted by grief are astronomical in this historical moment. It seems feasible to assume that nearly every youth program comprises folks who are grieving.



Source: [State of Student Mental Wellness Report California 2022](#)

THE EFFECTS OF GRIEF AND LOSS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

We can begin to understand the behavioral implications of grief in youth programs by peeking into the grieving brain. For some people, grief can be traumatic. For all people, it involves a "fight or flight" response mediated by the autonomic nervous system, as well as a depressive response (Shulman 2018).

As with the human trauma response, both stages affect the immune and endocrine systems, sleep cycle, and executive functioning, which includes impulse control, emotional regulation, and attention (Shulman 2018). No matter its form, grief changes the brain, body, and behavior, which inevitably impacts learning.

“I can’t sleep anymore, and I’m tired all day. ...sad all the time for no reason.” - 11th Grade Student (State of Student Mental Wellness Report 2022).

In afterschool, grieving young people—like those enduring trauma—might present with anger, outbursts, attention troubles, attachment-seeking, or avoidant behaviors, to name just several examples, all of which impede learning and relationship-building (Athan 2011). It can also threaten young people’s sense of future, which caring adults can also help to preserve or restore through relationships (Ratcliffe, Ruddell & Smith 2014).

Grief and trauma have the capacity to impair young peoples’ prefrontal cortical function, including emotional regulation (van der Kolk, 2015; Shulman, 2018). This means that children and teens who are grieving, especially because their prefrontal cortices are not yet fully developed, may struggle with impulse-control, attention, and identifying and managing emotions and coping strategies (Di Ciacco 2008; Shulman 2018).



GRIEF-RESPONSIVE TEACHING

Grief-responsive teaching is a pedagogical and interpersonal approach to teaching and learning that integrates the science and stories of grief into actionable program practices that support young peoples’ and youth workers’ well-being in times of loss. Because grief impacts the brain, body, and behavior and is the most commonly cited traumatic experience among young people, grief-responsive teaching seeks to support and empower the whole person, socially, emotionally, culturally, and academically (Collins 2021).

In the way that educator and thought leader Shawn Ginwright suggests moving away from “trauma informed teaching” to “healing-centered engagement” (2018), so does grief-responsive teaching push past the otherwise-used phrase “grief-sensitive teaching” to set forth an implication and expectation that educators must not only be sensitive to the impact of loss on young people, but move from sympathy to empathy, from awareness to responsive action, when supporting grieving young people at school. This has never been as important as during the COVID-19 pandemic and will remain a critical lens through which to welcome young people back to school and afterschool programs.

A grief-responsive educator not only reactively but proactively infuses their awareness of grief's prevalence and knowledge of grief's impact on young people's brains, bodies, and behaviors, into program strategies that seek to support the holistic well-being of all learners, including those who are grieving. Below are suggestions for implementing grief-responsive teaching in afterschool programs offer starting points for transitioning away from passive sensitivity toward a grief-responsive approach that empowers young peoples' and afterschool staff's agency in grieving and learning.



Source: Quilt of Tears

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM PRACTICE

Sometimes we see grief and trauma responses (e.g. behavioral changes) as things to be reprimanded. If we think about issues of restorative justice and the ways in which racialized violence, bias, and assimilation play a role in discipline, then it becomes even more critical for us to view behavioral changes as adaptations to be respected, not liabilities to control or punish.

Grief isn't a problem to fix or solve or avoid; it is a long process that requires that we support one another. Young people experiencing grief hold many strengths and insights; when we listen to them and their needs, and work collaboratively with them to widen their worlds, we position ourselves as a trusted teammate, and that's critical, because, "without trust, attempts at grief support feel like trespassing," (Collins 2021).

"We need more opportunities for exercise, meditation, yoga to maintain wellness. Sometimes we do meditation in gym class and that was where I first learned about it". – Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

To integrate grief-responsive teaching in the afterschool program, consider a tiered approach: Contemplate the *environmental* and *interpersonal* structures at play in your learning environment and how you might infuse grief-responsive practices into each level to better support young peoples' well-being—as well as your own.

Consider The Program Environment

Whether we are 8 or 80, experiencing grief and loss can incite a sense of helplessness, fear, and lack of control. Our routines no longer comprise the connections we once held close. Nor do the “hidden regulators” that we once valued (the sensory ingredients of our routines and relationships) may go unnoticed until they are gone (Di Ciacco 2008). In the midst of an altered world, offering opportunities in a program that return to young people a sense of routine, autonomy, and choice, helps recovery.

How do you already create and scaffold a sense of routine with your young people? In what ways do you offer choice to young people through project-based learning or community-building activities? Do they have a say in how program activities are structured? In the context of loss, return to these questions, as well as your program plans and goals, to consider how to enhance collaboration to empower young people to speak up for their needs.

Find ways to add activities, engagement strategies, and opportunities for dependable relationship-building into young peoples’ routines. Create **opportunities for choice** activities to afford young people agency in their learning, especially when the experience of loss might threaten the level of control young people have in their lives outside the program. You can even empower young people to recognize their own needs through seemingly small strategies, like allowing choice in activities or offering multiple “brain break” activities from which to choose.

Enhance Interpersonal Support

Connection is our greatest defense against trauma and necessary in the face of loss. Yet the reality of *vicarious trauma* reminds us of the importance that youth workers, who may be experiencing grief and loss alongside their young people, do not hold the sole onus for supporting young peoples in times of grief (Mehlmen-Wicks 2022). Educators and youth workers are not trained therapists, but that does not mean that as caring adults in the lives of young people they cannot offer guidance and mentoring that holds lifelong meaning for youth experiencing adversity.

Relationships are our greatest antidote to loss and trauma (van der Kolk 2015). Attachments with supportive caregivers—family members, mentors, teachers, youth workers, coaches—who are available and attentive most of the time allow children, teens, and young adults to establish a sense of relational safety that serves as a salve against challenging circumstances. Experiencing reciprocity, healthy boundaries, moments of “break and repair” (meaning resolution and maintained connection after an argument or relational disruption), and receiving encouragement as they seek to establish independence, all contribute to the likelihood that young people will adapt and recover from difficulty (Hendel 2020).



ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Increasing young peoples' web of connection, you buoy their sense of "perceived support availability," a term that psychologists use to describe the sense that people in one's circle will be supportive should they need to turn to them for help (Hartley & Coffee 2019). That is, itself, a powerful predictor of one's ability to cope with and integrate experiences of loss. This can be accomplished by offering "talking circles" in an extracurricular program, for example.



- Welcome young peoples' expressions of their lived experiences as they arise naturally in the learning environment but never require or force young peoples' disclosures, lest that pressure induces further trauma (Stanford Children's Health n.d.). Be mindful that culturally responsive teaching and grief-responsive teaching must be intertwined, as young peoples' identities and contexts may influence their orientation toward and expressions about grief and loss (Bonanno 2019).
- To support all learners, implement regulatory activities into the afterschool program—meditation and mindfulness activities, freewriting, activities that afford young people choice or a sense of contribution—on a regular basis, not only in the weeks following a known loss. This creates a grief-responsive environment while offering young people strategies that they may turn to in and outside of the youth program to activate their parasympathetic nervous system and enhance their ability to access higher cognitive functioning, from emotional regulation to problem-solving.

"Some kids may need to take a break and walk, or take a break and talk, or take a break and color, draw, write, meditate, etc." – Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

- Analyze your remote or hybrid learning plan and consider how you structure routine in young peoples' days, as well as your own (Children's Bereavement Center 2019). Humans crave predictability during tumultuous times. Consider what about your class structure remains the same across time and identify ways to infuse enrichment activities into this routine, especially those that support emotional regulation. For example, invite young people to begin each day with five minutes of guided meditation or close class sessions with 10 minutes of free writing. Host a read-aloud at the start of class each Wednesday or invite young people to share a favorite quote every Friday. Such activities imbue the learning environment with a sense of community, a recognition of humanity, and a commitment to honor the needs of grieving young people, while also building into your program spaces to support your well-being, too.

If afterschool educators keep the importance of their work in mind and seek to establish a sense of safety (physical and emotional), facilitate connection between young people and peers, as well as young people and caring adults, and empower young peoples' self-expression and leadership, they are already on their way to being grief-responsive.

SUPPORT BEYOND THE AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM SETTING

Grief support takes a village. Being mindful of the school- and community-based resources available to you and your young people and working to facilitate furthered connection can both ensure that young people are getting the support and connection they need. This also steers clear of a savior mentality, or the idea that we alone must “fix” or heal young people, which we know to be deficit-based and detrimental in both equity and loss contexts, overlooking the inherent strengths, resources, and agency that young people possess.

However, if a young person is expressing thoughts of harming themselves (suicide) or another, this requires that a report is made. It is important that you consult with your supervisor and someone in the school organization that has a mental health background.

“Without dealing with mental health, students can’t succeed in academics or sports.” -Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

The Grief-Responsive School System

It is critical to acknowledge that the most effective yet absent approach to grief support is school-wide—involving all adult staff, young people, and support professionals. Because grieving children and adults benefit most from a sense of connection and community, and because grief support becomes most manageable when adult staff is joined by a team of colleagues—not left to bear the potential burden of witnessing and grappling with young peoples’ losses alone—it makes sense that adult staff and learners would function best in a school system that takes a holistic approach to supporting grieving young people. This could look like integrating regulatory activities across grade-levels. For example, accessing and offering mental health professionals and resources to young people and adults; creating spaces for conversations about trauma, grief, and responsive teaching strategies; offering affinity spaces for youth, or increasing young peoples’ access to co-curricular opportunities that support their coping.

“My teacher set up a wellness group which goes over some basic mental health as well as some techniques. I used it after outpatient therapy for about 6 weeks every Friday just to keep things refreshed and I recommended to my friend who was struggling with mental health to the group so she could get some basics while she works with her parents on accepting her mental health and trying to get help for it.” – Student (Kane County Health Department, 2021).

Yet, whether due to a lack of awareness, funds, capacities, or resources, support of young people is often siloed in individual classrooms or the offices of school counselors (in districts privileged to have them). This isolated work, which may involve unpaid emotional labor on the part of the practitioner, increases the likelihood that adult staff will experience burnout, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress (Koenig, Rodger & Specht 2017)—the vicarious, and very real, neurological impact of repeated exposure to others’ pain.

Don’t Minimize Program Impact

It’s important to recognize the ways in which a program setting can impact young people far beyond, and long after their time in the program. As grief-responsive practitioners, whether coaches or afterschool workers, it’s always important to consider how we can promote young peoples’ life-long resiliency.

SELF-CARE: ADULT STAFF



Helping youth deal with issues of grief and loss can be very stressful. This work can trigger one's own experience of grief or loss or result in "vicarious grief." Thus, it is important that youth program staff engage in substantive self-care and stay mindful of their individual boundaries and bandwidths.

Below are some recommendations on how organizations can promote such preservational practices among their staff:

Staff Meetings – Open staff meetings with mindfulness "warm up" activities. Also, include "check-in" circles which allow staff members to share their personal experiences and those in the program. Facilitate "open" discussions on grief and loss issues. *Note: The above activities are also good for youth participants in afterschool programs.*

Professional Development – Provide ongoing training led by mental health professionals on issues of grief and loss as well as grief-responsive teaching, self-care, and the practice of mindfulness. *(Note: if your program does not have access to such professionals, explore the additional resources below for free alternatives).*

Mental Health Benefits – Provide staff with mental health days. Ensure that staff mental health benefits allow for mental health and therapy sessions.

GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT TERMS

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS - Community-based and school-based youth programs that are conducted before or after the school day and during the summer. These programs are also referred to as afterschool, out-of-school time (OST), youth programs or summer learning programs.

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF – This can be experienced in the expectancy of a loss. It can occur in anticipation of a death or other type of loss — such as the loss of abilities or independence. (Samaritan)

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF – This is grief that is not socially or societally acknowledged. (e.g. a miscarriage, the death of a loved one to suicide, or other forms of loss/grief that somehow intersect with societally-reinforced silences or taboos).

DYSREGULATORY STATE OF BEING - A poor ability to manage emotional responses or to keep them within an acceptable range of typical emotional reactions. This can refer to a wide range of emotions including sadness, anger, irritability, and frustration. (Cuncic, 2021)

FLOW – Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi coined the term “flow.” He defines flow as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” (Oppland, 2021)

GENERATIONAL GRIEF or TRAUMA – This is seen in communities that have historically faced brutality, loss, inequity, and violence.

“It’s very hard for me to see these Black deaths continue happening. There’s so much craziness, it’s hard for me to focus.” – Student (Jones, 2022).

GRIEF - Grief is a strong, sometimes overwhelming emotion for people, regardless of whether their sadness stems from the loss of a loved one or from a terminal diagnosis they or someone they love have received. They might find themselves feeling numb and removed from daily life, unable to carry on with regular duties while saddled with their sense of loss. Grief is a natural reaction to loss (Mayo Clinic, 2016).

GRIEF-RESPONSIVE TEACHING - a pedagogical and interpersonal approach to teaching and learning that integrates science and stories of grief into actionable program practices that support young peoples’ and youth workers’ well-being in times of loss (Collins).

HEALING-CENTERED ENGAGEMENT – This is an asset-based and culturally-rooted approach to healing and well-being for young people of color and their adult allies. The term was developed by Dr. Shawn Ginwright in 2018. It is based on more than 30 years of research and practice with young people, schools, probation departments, and social workers (Flourish Agenda).



Source: Artwork by Lauren Coakley

HIDDEN REGULATORS - The sensory ingredients of our routines and relationships that may go unnoticed until they are gone, such as the sound of a parent's laugh, a youth worker's thoughtful support, or a sibling's favorite music floating through the home (Di Ciacco, 2008).

LIVING LOSSES - forms of loss such as those associated with divorce, housing insecurity, foster care, or a familial falling out (Harris and Winokuer, 2019).

"A lot of traumatizing stuff has occurred, and the house of my family became very toxic then before covid-19. my mother's and my relationship has been getting worse to the point of me living with my grandmother so it won't become worse, me and my parents don't talk unless its needed." - 10th Grade Student (State of Student Mental Wellness Report 2022).

LOSS – the experience that results when something or someone you love is taken away (Help Guide).



Source: Artwork by Lauren Coakley

NEUROPLASTICITY - The malleability of our brains and our ability to form new neural connections throughout life by changing our behaviors. Key in our ability to adapt to, and even recover from, early-life adversity (Cherry, 2022).

SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS - the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms align closely with those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can result in cognitive, physical, behavioral, and emotional challenges, from hypervigilance to preoccupation, apathy to impaired immunity (Baiker, 2020).

TRAUMA- INFORMED CARE - is an approach, based on knowledge of the impact of trauma, aimed at ensuring environments and services are welcoming and engaging for service recipients and staff (Trauma Informed Oregon).

VICARIOUS GRIEF or TRAUMA – This can be experienced when exposed to others' losses. It is an ongoing process of change over time that results from witnessing or hearing about other people's suffering and need. When practitioners identify with the pain of people who have endured

terrible things, they bring their grief, fear, anger, and despair into their own awareness and experience (Trish).

“Suicidal thoughts became a problem but I was always scared to speak up about it so I kept it to myself and relieved my stress with self-harm. It came to the point where I planned on committing the night before new year’s. Instead, I cried ... It was- and still is- really hard for me to be the person I was before. I’m also a bigger person so to lose weight, I’ve tried starving myself but end up eating more than I should. Recently, there was a time where I ate so much and felt guilty about it after to the point that I cried about it. I became very isolated and so used to the sadness that sometimes it brings comfort, and I hate it. OH! I also figured out my gender identity which I had a hard time figuring out.” – Youth (State of Student Mental Wellness Report 2022).

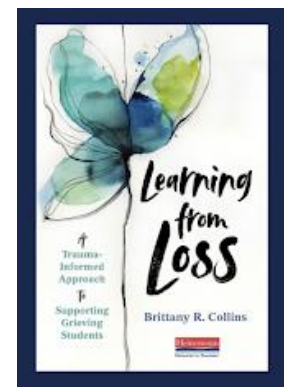
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Below are links to resources that offer starting points for those looking to learn more:

- [The Coalition to Support Grieving Young peoples](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](#)
- [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#)
- [The Dougy Center](#)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [The Trauma Research Foundation](#)
- [Grief- Responsive Teaching](#)

Below are links to Brittany Collins’ book and to some of her earlier writings, partially reprinted in this paper:

- [Learning from Loss: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Supporting Grieving Students](#)
- [Grief Has Engulfed the Learning Environment. Here’s What Can Help](#)
- [We Need Grief-Responsive Teaching During and After the Pandemic](#)
- [The Pandemic Is Raging. Here’s How to Support Your Grieving Students](#)





Source: Quilt of Tears

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