Hello Friends!

I’m hoping this session gives you some tools to use and share with your colleagues who aren’t Art teachers as well. Tragedy, loss, and grief are things we all must deal with at some point in our lives. As adults, we have coping skills and strategies that many of our students haven’t learned yet. As educators, we also serve in the role as mentor, parent, and confidant to many of our students, among MANY other things. It is my sincere desire to share with you some things that I’ve learned and been able to use to help students through the years in my role as a classroom teacher. Some of these activities I haven’t used yet, but in putting together material for this presentation, other teachers contributed ideas that I wanted to share. I’m not a professional thief, so I want to add that most of these are *adaptions* from someone else’s ideas. I don’t want to take any credit for these lessons as my originals, although I am not sure where most of them came from. I’ve tried to list websites and links where applicable.

What I’m not: What I am:

* A Psychologist \* A Mom
* An Art Therapist \* A Teacher in my 23rd year
* An Expert (in ANYTHING) \* A collector of fabulous ideas

My first experience with loss was my best friend and classmate my senior year of high school. The date Friday, November 13, 1987 will always stand out in my mind. Since then, I have lost students to auto accidents and hunting accidents. I lost two eighth graders to suicide within two years. It’s hard to process all those emotions and grieve while being a mentor and providing stability for your other students. Can you imagine if your first experience with death was a classmate that took his own life? Some of these activities help students individually while the collaborative activities help students help each other grieve and support one another. We won’t always have the answers that our students ask, but we can support, be an example, and guide them through the dark days until the sun shines again.

So let’s get started!

First of all, we need to acknowledge that when a tragedy strikes, for many students, it will be their first experience with death. Some will have never even attended a funeral before. The “empty desk” is a daunting site after the tragic loss of a student. One thing that helped was to rearrange the desks so that students didn’t have to see the empty desk. I had parents relate to me that this simple effort was the added element question of “What could I have done to prevent this?” that students must grapple with.

We know that:

-We are a vital part of our student’s support system

-Emotions that are not processed will resurface in unhealthy ways

-There are healthy ways to grieve.

-It’s normal to hurt when we experience loss

-Not all students will be grieving, but will be uncomfortable watching their peers grieve.

We need to validate their feelings as real, and that acknowledge that processing those emotions is hard. Processing tragedy doesn’t happen overnight. Most often it takes some time, and every person grieves differently, especially during the adolescent years. I like how the passage below expresses this.

*“Yes, loss is real – regardless of age or social status. For a teen, raging hormones and peer pressure can magnify their experience; upset can cascade into chaos quickly.*

*And when you don’t know how to handle something, what’s your go-to response? Let me rephrase that – what’s a teenager’s go-to response? For some, it’s frustration that leads to anger; others isolate themselves and a few resort to violence. It breaks your heart when you feel ill equipped to help.” (What Happens When a Teenager Experiences Loss? Crosswalk.com)*

At a time when adolescents face numerous social and emotional challenges in a highly-charged developmental period, it is essential to realize that they may exhibit grief differently than young children or adults. Understanding and recognizing these differences is key to identifying a grieving student and responding to his or her unique needs.

How teens grieve differently than adults;  
  
**1. Adolescents are likely to experience losses that are sudden, unexpected, and traumatic.** The three leading causes of death in adolescence are unintentional injury (accidents), suicide, and homicide, according to the[National Vital Statistics System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db37_fig_2.png), which reports that 72 percent of deaths between the ages of 12 and 19 occur for these reasons in the United States. So at a time when adolescents most strongly base their own identity on their peers, a loss of a peer is likely to be due to a traumatic event. Adolescents may need support in processing the complex emotions often associated with grief after sudden death, including a sense that the world is less than safe or predictable. Such losses may affect an entire school community.

**2. Adolescents can be isolated in their grief.** As adolescents become more independent, they also may become less comfortable in seeking support from parents or other adults. The young child who once curled up in a parent’s lap when upset may now be the adolescent who slams his or her bedroom door. In a middle school and high school setting, it may be more challenging for teachers and counselors to effectively assess whether a student is having a difficult time coping with a loss, or to even know that a loss has occurred in a student’s life.

**3. Adolescent egocentricity stresses the need for normalcy.**  
Adolescents often believe the world is constantly looking at them and judging them. The adolescent then places great value on fitting in — emphasizing a sense of strength and normalcy.

**4. Adolescents are more likely to turn to the Internet and social media as they cope with loss.**  
Adolescents are digital natives — at home with technology, while most adults are digital immigrants. Adolescents go online for information and utilize a variety of forms of social media for support and opportunities to memorialize. While good information and social support can be found online, adolescents also need to be reminded that the information may not be accurate, and that the anonymity of the Internet may expose them to cruel comments or even online predators.

**5. Adolescence is often a time of spiritual questioning.**  
Adolescents know the beliefs that they have been taught in childhood. Part of the development of identity during adolescence is asking, “What is it that I believe?” In a time of spiritual questioning, grieving adolescents may not be able to rely on their faith as strongly as they did as children, or as strongly as they may again in adulthood.

**6. Adolescent grief may be masked by other behaviors.**  
Acting out behaviors, substance abuse, and eating disorders may all be ways that the adolescent copes with loss and seeks support. Adults who work with adolescents, including teachers, counselors, and health care professionals, need to learn to recognize these signs and refer if necessary.

As Artists, we know:

* Art Heals - Many regular education teachers may not recognize the role in healing that the arts can play. When we create, we use another part of our brains and the part that is under duress is allowed to rest.
* Art is a way to express ourselves when we don’t have the words to explain our feelings.
* Art can be a form of meditation and can be therapeutic.

How does art heal?

\* Scientific studies tell us that art heals by changing a person’s physiology and attitude. The body’s physiology changes from one of stress to one of deep relaxation, from one of fear to one of creativity and inspiration. Art and music put a person in a different brain wave pattern. Art and music affect a person’s autonomic nervous system, their hormonal balance and their brain neurotransmitters.

\* Art and music affect every cell in the body instantly to create a healing physiology that changes the immune system and blood flow to all the organs. Art and music also immediately change a person’s perceptions of their world. They change attitude, emotional state, and pain perception. They create hope and positivity and they help people cope with difficulties. They transform a person’s outlook and way of being in the world.

\* In fact, it is now known by neurophysiologists that art, prayer, and healing all come from the same source in the body; they all are associated with similar brain wave patterns and mind body changes; they all are deeply connected in feeling and meaning. Art, prayer, and healing all take us into our inner world, the world of imagery and emotion, of visions and feelings. ([www.artashealing.org](http://www.artashealing.org))

\*\*\*With all of these projects, as well as many others, it isn’t just about the actual project the students are working on as much as the dialogue that takes place between them, both with each other and with us as role models. It’s a time to help each other heal. One thing to keep in mind is that we need to keep all of the activities within a normal routine when possible because the students still need structure.

References and Resources

“6 Ways That Adolescent Grief Is Different” [Kenneth J. Doka, M.Div., Ph.D.](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/kenneth-j-doka) Senior Consultant, Hospice Foundation of America

[www.artashealing.org](http://www.artashealing.org)

[www.artandhealing.org](http://www.artandhealing.org)

[www.arttherapyblog.com](http://www.arttherapyblog.com)

[www.artwithheart.org](http://www.artwithheart.org)

[www.expressiveartworkshops.com](http://www.expressiveartworkshops.com)

[www.arttherapyalliance.org](http://www.arttherapyalliance.org)

[www.schoolcounselor.com](http://www.schoolcounselor.com)

[www.griefspeaks.com](http://www.griefspeaks.com)

[www.creativityintherapy.com](http://www.creativityintherapy.com)

[www.good-grief.com](http://www.good-grief.com)

**Projects and Activities** **Notes**

\*Some of these projects can be adapted to the age you teach or modified to include other elements that you would want to cover in your curriculum anyway. (Symbolism, Rituals of various cultures surrounding death, or Reflection, Communication, Culture’s influence on art, etc.)

Ephemeral Art

Prayer Flags

Messages in a Bottle

Postcards from Your Future Self

Graffiti Wall

Mandalas

Art Journals

Healed Heart Activity

Memory Ornaments

Inspiration Stones (Like Story Stones)

Healed Heart Tutorial

Puzzle Memorial

Memory Book

Collaborative Collage

Family Gift (Collaborative)

Born

A born artist, a born teacher….

Unlock the door…opportunity awaits you

Don’t judge…their path is not yours

Trust this process…trust in yourself and in your gifts

Don’t doubt yourself…the answer is “Yes You Can”

Unlearn…those negative thoughts

Keep going…keep creating

Trust…in your story, in your truth

You are born to this path…you are enough

Create…from your heart, your sacred vessel of creativity

Intuition grows…when you trust your voice

Come home…to your true self

Surrender…to your calling to make the world a better place

Guide others…to unlock their own paths

Continue…to create and pour your authentic self out to the world

Feel your power…celebrate your calling

Just keep going…YOU MAKE A DIFFERNECE!