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A Behavioral Health, Wellness & (P)SEL Newsletter

Issue 4: Grief & (P)SEL



Message from the CEO

By Dr. Jared Scherz

Grief has taken on new meaning during this pandemic. Death and the threat of serious health problems are compounded by new types of loss, not experienced before in our lifetime. The prolonged absence of freedom, socialization, volition, and fun have triggered widespread grief for our faculty and students. We mourn normalcy in our lives including ordinary safety we took for granted nearly a year ago. Even when we don't know of the names, the continuous report of growing casualties from this virus is jarring, creating fragility in our place on this earth.

For adults who have a greater capacity for the incredulous, the numbers seem surreal, but for children who have limited stress tolerance, this can be overwhelming. We don't yet know how this perennial exposure to grief will impact us long term but it's safe to say that trauma, mental health, and other serious ailments are on the tsunami radar.

As district and classroom leaders we also want to be mindful of what is unseen. Loss and the threat of loss will stimulate past experiences, potentially years old. A difficult facet of grief is that we can get flooded by old experiences, especially those related to loss, which amplify the power of our grief. This can make providing and receiving support more challenging, especially if the person isn't aware of the provocation.

As is the case in most cultural and religious ceremonies, coming together to share the burden is the only way to find relief. We can't speed up mourning we can only slow it down by not attending to or expressing our pain. Providing regular opportunities to process feelings before they accumulate to a dangerous level is the best gift we can provide our community.

The Deep Hole of Grief: One Teacher's Story

By Chandra Joseph-Lacet



I am literally sitting here typing this blog on the heels of getting that dreaded phone call. This time it was from my Uncle. He called to tell me that my Aunt had taken a turn for the worse and hospice had to be called. I immediately thought there was no way I could finish this blog. It hurts too much. I can barely breathe. I have that lump in my throat; you know that lump that makes it so hard to swallow because you are fighting back the tears; the lump that makes you stop and force yourself to slow down and remember to breathe because you don't even realize that you have been holding your breath. And then you take a huge exhale. You're quiet. You can feel your heart pounding and your head begins to ache as you literally feel the blood pulsing through your veins. Your thoughts are all over the place and you begin to talk to yourself. And, in my case I say, "Chandra, get a grip. Pull yourself together. You can do this. You have work to do." Push through. And so I do and I know many of you do too.

By the time I finish writing this, Aunt Ida will have passed. I know this and I already miss her. I begin to think of what my life will be without her. I begin to think of all of the amazing memories I have of her. I begin to think of all the future time I thought I would have with her. And then my mind drifts to other recent losses I've experienced; Aunt Josette, Uncle Charles, Aunt Eslin...and then to deeper wounds of losing my mom and my son. Grief has a way of stopping you cold and then pulling you down this dark spiralling hole of loss, both past and present. Somehow one loss pins itself to another and they form a chain of despair that pulls you further and further down the hole. I begin to think about all of the losses in my life. I begin to think about the losses over my entire educational career. I begin to think about all of the losses over this past year. I begin to think of students I have lost, and colleagues. I think of losing my mentor and loving friend, my fierce educational warrior who always said, "Keep the faith!" I can hear her saying, "Chandra, I am so sorry. What can I do?" And she too, I lost this year.

And as I sit in this place of grief I realize there is nothing else for me to do but sit in this discomfort. And so I do. I think of all the loss in the world. I think of the homeless and the hungry. I think of the unemployed and underemployed. I think of the devastation of this Covid-19 and the layers and layers of loss both seen and unseen. It all hurts. I have a pit in my stomach. I'm tired now. No not tired, exhausted. This is what grief does. It exhausts you.

And then the present interrupts my thoughts. I look at my phone and a colleague has a question about work which leads me to my email. I get lost in my inbox for what seems like hours, followed by a meeting. No one knows what I'm going through. I just push through. To stop and share would be too hard. Besides, there's work to do. There is always work to do. And for a while, I think this is good. Work is a good distraction from the grief. The pain feels too heavy right now anyway, so it feels good to lay this burden down. I keep working. I keep working to keep the grief at bay. I'll muster the strength and push through. And I do, until mustering the strength exhausts me. Mustering the strength in the face of grief is exhausting. This is what grief does. It exhausts you. Grief doesn't care if you think you are strong. Grief is stronger.

And so here I sit, grieving, crying, feeling the pain. I'm not defeated. I'm grieving. This is what my grief looks like. Your grief may look different and that's okay. Grieve what you need to, in the way that you need to. You don't need to let others tell you that you need to be strong when you simply don't feel like it. You, do you.

I leave you with a charge. Please check on your colleagues. No doubt many are grieving right now. You never know what someone is going through. Grief can and does look different for everyone. And yes even check on those "strong" colleagues, because some of us are not alright. Some of us are dealing with unimaginable pain and grief. Some of us are exhausted. None of us have capes. We are humans; teacher-humans that need to be allowed to grieve.

Rest in Peace Aunt Ida. Rest in Peace.

Star District



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Grief in an emotion that few people can escape. While this virus has indiscriminately taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world, this past year has demonstrated that grief encompasses many forms of loss; people have lost jobs, ways of life, freedom, financial stability, friendships, ability to travel and see family. These forms of grief elicit many of the same feelings of loss that losing a loved one does, including sadness, despair and loneliness. Almost every American has some connection to the educational world whether they are a student, teacher, administrator or family member of someone in education, and so the educational community has found itself having to address grief amongst its members as never before.

Karen D'Avino, superintendent of Vernon School District in Sussex County, NJ has been mindful of this challenge and addressed it head on and with compassion. "One of the things we did for students was look at academics as an indicator. After the first marking period there was an increased number of failures so we had principals personally reach out with phone calls to check on families. They were so appreciative and responsive. They were overwhelmed with not just dealing with the

loss of the normal educational routine, but sometimes jobs and financial stability. We offered support and help. The Department of Education also has SEL competencies that we tried to utilize and work within. Additionally, we recently tried to focus on positives and successes. What you measure you treasure. If you only focus on the grief you miss the joy. We focused on accomplishments such as student and teacher volunteer activities and sports accomplishments. I was recently asked if there would be snow days; even if we are completely virtual if there's a snow day, there's a snow day – go out and enjoy the snow, make snow angels, go sledding and send pictures that we can post. It's important for self care; embrace the joy.”

D'Avino acknowledges that this is an ongoing, fluid issue that needs to be acknowledged and proactively addressed everyday. “We often say it feels like we're running a marathon sprint. As quickly as we address one issue, another one pops up and there is need for additional support. We have faculty who are trauma informed coordinators and are trained in a trauma informed approach. They try to anticipate children that may be falling through the cracks. When the new system was put into place, whether in person, virtual or some hybrid version, there were children who weren't showing up. We brought them back into the system with support and training. TeacherCoach was instrumental for us in that they conducted parent support workshops to help parents who were struggling with balancing the new learning model along with their own job challenges. We use the TeacherCoach dashboard so faculty can tap into engagements that help them support the students or their own needs and self care.”

As challenging as the new learning environment has been for teachers, students, parents and administrators adjust to, D'Avino acknowledges that some positives have come of this, and that even when things go back to normal, they may keep on some of the new ways. “One thing that's been helpful is that Zoom has allowed me to meet with multiple faculties across multiple buildings. As far as PD, teachers have learned to collaborate with each other. They can do things they never thought they could do a year ago. They realize the importance of being present and can get to multiple things throughout the day. Access is greater because of the virtual platform. We were already a one-to-one district, with every student having Chromebooks. Additionally, we purchased hotspots. We are in the mountains, so there aren't always great Internet connections. Our IT department as been great throughout all of this. The community has been wonderful and supportive of each other. They've formed learning pods and helped each other when families needed it. Something that everyone seems to like and wants to keep is the virtual parent teacher conference format. Teachers and parents liked it so much better; they didn't have to rush to school, leave work early, or feel rushed because someone was waiting.”

Always committed and looking for ways to continually support her staff and community, D'Avino contemplates what more she could do. “As I reflect and think about my role as superintendent, I think I can always do more. I think we can create space for having conversations about the tough things. Having conversations with

counselors, or getting off Zoom and having dinner together are just as important as learning. They are easier said than done, but I think they are worth encouraging. There's no one size fits all, but giving each other the space to heal and succeed is important to support each other and grieve when we need to."



Dr. Jared Scherz Leads Innovative Workshop & Interactive Play with Actors from Philadelphia's Legendary Walnut Street Theater to Monmouth County School's Partnership for Wellness

A virtual play, performed by professional actors from the Walnut St. Theatre depicts a modern-day virtual classroom. The students and teacher struggle to find their way, spotlighting the breakdown of resiliency. The goals of this workshop were to reconsider our priorities in order to endure this long-term duress. A foundation was established for the culminating session, bringing equity, trauma, SEL, and well-being together into one paradigm.

[See What They're Saying About the Workshop Here](#)
