



A Bereavement Guide

For Unit Presidents and Release Officers

As much as we wish that OECTA members did not have to face loss or tragedy, the reality is that they will, either individually or collectively. As a unit president or release officer you know that your members look to you for support when faced with tragic events. The information in this resource is meant to provide you with guidance when dealing with such difficult circumstances.

Recognizing that each local unit is unique and unit presidents and release officers know their members' needs best: this guidance document has been created to be responsive to the need for unit level bereavement support in the immediate, and over time.

SELF-CARE

The responsibility to care for others that falls on the shoulders of unit presidents and release officers can take a physical, emotional, and mental toll.

- Set up checks and balances with your staff in the office and/or your executive members to ensure that personal self-care needs are met.
- Consider who is part of your personal care team and what your individual self-care plan looks like.
- Know that you are not alone: make sure to call on fellow unit presidents and release officers.
- Reach out to the Counseling and Member Services department for support.

For a Member Who is Bereaved



- If possible, set up communication with your board so that you are informed when members are taking a bereavement leave and the circumstances of the bereavement. In small units, most often the unit president will know which members are off and why. In larger units this is not necessarily possible, so this communication piece is very valuable. It is important to know when a member has faced a deep and heart-breaking loss so that you can take the necessary steps to support them.
- Communication regarding a bereaved member should also come from the school Association Representative.
- In preparation to contact a member, review the Support for a Bereaved Co-worker resource. Check in with the member to relay your condolences and see what their needs are. You may also want to reach out to coworkers and friends of the bereaved for practical ideas on how to assist them as the bereaved individual cannot always articulate their needs.
- The member may require more time off than the typical five-day bereavement leave and will request guidance from you regarding leaves. You will need to work collaboratively with the member to determine any type of leave they need. If you are aware of grief supports available through your school board, these can also be shared with the member i.e., EAP.
- When a member is returning to work after suffering a loss, connect with them to find out if they will need any accommodations for their return. They may not know what accommodations they need, if any, so it is helpful to provide information as to what type of accommodations could be available to them so they can decide. If they request accommodations, set up a back-to-work meeting with your board to discuss them and get them put into place.
- Your role as a release officer is to provide support, information/options, and assistance with transitions but not to give advice or direction regarding the grieving process.
- Provide the member's colleagues at their school with the online support guide, or ask the school representative to provide it to them.
- Once the member is back at work, check in with them regularly to see how the transition is going. If they are off work for a lengthy period of time, check in with them while they are off to see how they are coping.
- There are often grief support groups or counseling services in your community that specialize in grief. There are also many good online resources. Have the contact information and resources on hand at the unit office to provide upon request.

A Colleague Has Died



- Once again, communication with the board is important to make certain that members' needs are met, and the deceased member is honoured appropriately.
- Work with your board to ensure the release of members who need to attend a funeral or celebration of life if held during the school day. Some boards are more understanding and accommodating than others, so in some cases this could be a bit of a challenge.
- Check to be sure your board provides grief counseling services to members.
- Make sure your board is sensitive to the cultural and religious needs and beliefs of the deceased member and their family. This is important if the school or board chooses to hold a service or mass for staff to remember and honour their deceased colleague.
- Communicate with the member's family to check that their wishes are being heard and respected.
- Have a list of support and counseling services in your communities ready to share with any members who reach out for support.
- Be present at the affected school. Whether you knew the deceased member well or not, your physical presence provides a great deal of comfort and support to their colleagues. It also provides an opportunity for members to share questions and concerns with you that they might not otherwise.
- Members may be looking for ways to support their colleague's family in their grief. They may find it helpful for you or their representative to share the infographic titled Practical Ways to Assist.



A Student Has Died



- Communication with the student's school and the board is crucial.
- If the funeral or celebration of life is held within the school day, work with the board to ensure that all who need to be released to attend can be.
- Check that the board is providing counseling for members as well as students.
- Find out everything you can about the student and their family. Ensure the school and board is sensitive to any cultural and religious needs of the family in any plans or services they intend to carry out.
- Make certain your members are being sensitive to any cultural and religious needs of the family as they reach out to provide assistance and support.
- Some teachers will have students in their classrooms at various stages of grief over a period of time. They will need age-appropriate teaching materials and advice from counseling services. You will want to make sure your board is providing what is needed so teachers are not left floundering. The teacher may be dealing with their own grief at the same time so this support from their board is critical.
- Be present at the affected school. Your physical presence speaks volumes. Your members need to see you at the school and know that you are involved and providing all the support you can. You should expect multiple school visits over the first several months.
- Check in with your members and the school over time so that you know if counseling services continue to be offered. Sometimes an employer will provide services initially as an emergency resource but not offer long-term support. Counseling for grief over the loss of a student may not be "one and done" for staff or students and school boards need to be kept aware of the needs of the school community. If it becomes clear that staff and students require further support, this is an opportunity for you to advocate for those services.