



# loss, grief and growth

Education Project Incorporated





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## Prologue

A story about the visionary behind this project.

Yves Berthiaume's father died when Yves was twelve years old. His mother then took over managing the family business, Berthiaume Funeral Home, while raising her six children. Yves was "the class clown" and the consummate comedian. He was more interested in sports and entertaining peers than in studying and academics. As his high school years came to a close he was informed by his guidance counsellor that he was not suited for college. This was an eye opener! He wanted to be a funeral director and run the family business. Yves says "Had it not been for the hard work and dedication of my teachers, I would not have made it to college." The teachers took a special interest in him, and encouraged him to work extra hard to realize his goal. Yves learned on a personal level the value of a good teacher-student bond.

As a funeral director, Yves encountered children who experienced the death of a loved one and wondered if there was value in having students tour the funeral home. He outlined a tour of the funeral home that included a question and answer period which allowed students to openly discuss life and death. After several discussions with the local school boards and trustees, the funeral home tours came to fruition. In fact, they have become a regular part of the school activities. One winter when field trips were scaled back, the



teachers and students opted to keep the trip to the funeral home while other trips were cancelled!

The most frequently asked question by teachers was, “How do we support our grieving children?” With this question in mind, the “Loss, Grief and Growth Education Project” was founded.

*Loss, Grief and Growth* honours the relationship between students and teachers. It acknowledges the reality that teachers are connected with students long after a crisis is over, after the “grief counsellors” have left the premise, and long after the larger community is focused on the needs of each grieving child.

This project honours teachers. It acknowledges the teacher as a mentor, a creator of a safe environment, a communicator inviting expression of feelings and fears, and as a creative leader of teachable moments.

*Loss, Grief and Growth* also honours children, and their capacity to grow through grieving. Dr. Linda Goldman reminds us that, “*We are powerless to control the losses and catastrophic events our children may experience, but by honouring their inner wisdom, providing mentorship, and creating safe havens for expression, we can empower them to become more capable, more caring human beings.*”

## Loss, Grief and Growth

“Life is a process of loss, change, and growth. Understanding loss issues can make them more predictable and therefore less frightening. Through grief we can grow in inner and outer strength, and healing can take place.”

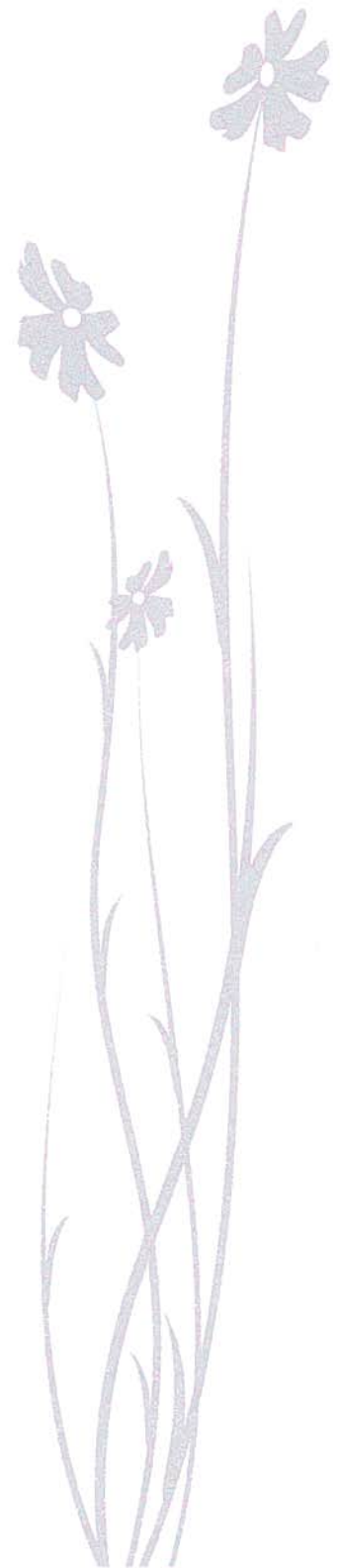
**Dr. Linda Goldman**

**Loss** is to be separated from and deprived of a valued person, object, status or relationship.

**Grief** is the “whole person” response to loss and includes feelings, thinking, physical symptoms, social changes, and spirituality.

**Grieving** is the process of responding to the loss and adapting to the loss. Grieving is a normal, healthy response. Grieving is not something to “get over.” A person does not need to “recover from” grief/grieving.

**Bereavement** refers to the state of having experienced a loss.



*Loss, Grief and Growth* (LGG) provides educators with information, strategies, and resources to support students who have and who will experience loss and grief. The basic assumption is that loss is a part of life, that grief is a normal and healthy adaptive response to loss, and that through grief children can grow in inner and outer strength. The focus of LGG is on loss associated with death, but the content could be applied to other losses.

A brief introduction discusses loss, grief as a “whole person” response to loss, and factors that influence the grieving process. It suggests that young people may be the “experts” at teaching us about their grieving.

“The School Community” highlights the role of the principal and the teachers, implementation of the school crisis response protocol, general guidelines for supporting grieving students.

The resource includes strategies, presented in grade clusters, for teachers to select from in responding to students in their classes.

“Tasks” provide teachers with activities to introduce students to loss, grief, and ways to support one another. “Teachable Moments” provide strategies for responding when death and loss occur in the school community, news, curriculum or larger community.

A list of suggested resources identifies books, websites, and other sources of information for teachers, adults, and children dealing with loss and grief.

The power in ‘teachable moments’ comes from catching the moment and creating a living dynamic learning situation.  
**Goldman**

Teachers can use the *Loss, Grief and Growth* resource to be responsive when a student has experienced a significant loss or they could use it to be proactive and help prepare students for such losses. For example, students might discuss a situation apart from the stress of loss and grieving.

It might be appropriate to incorporate some of the suggestions into ‘teachable moments’—when a news article is read, during novel studies, or during Remembrance Day discussions.

## Losses and Grieving

From the beginning of their lives children have the capacity to observe the world around them. They observe many things that they cannot name. They may sense the cycle of life and death but not yet have words for it. They may sense that there are forbidden subjects that are not talked about. As children get older they begin to realize that they themselves will die. They learn that people grow old and die but they may not know how to acknowledge and deal with their grief and what this loss means to them. **Silverman**

### Loss

Loss is rooted in attachment. Things such as the loss of a friendship, the loss of a pet, moving schools (and losing friends), abuse, and rejection can be sources of loss.



Two of the best kept secrets of the twentieth century are that everyone suffers and that suffering can be used for growth.  
**Lawrence LeShan**

Many students are confronted with one or more life-changing events involving loss and grief while they are in school:

- their own serious illness or physical injury or that of a family member;
- a family member with a chronic or degenerative condition;
- family or community violence;
- separation, divorce, and remarriage;
- death of a relative, friend, classmate, neighbour, or teacher;
- loss of a friendship – moving to a new neighbourhood, city, province, or country;
- awareness of violence, global poverty, war, disasters, etc., that generate a sense of helplessness causing intense and free-floating grief.

## Grief

Historically, grief was considered something that a person needed to “get over,” and the goal was to “sever the ties with the deceased.”

Today we realize that grief is a process of adapting to a new world in which the person now lives – one without the deceased loved one. Although difficult, grief is a normal, desirable, and healthy response to loss.

Grief is a “whole person experience,” so responses may include:

- **Feelings/emotions** - e.g., anger, sadness, guilt, fear, loneliness, worry, surprise, disbelief, increased sensitivity, wondering ‘How can I live without...?’, shock, helplessness, depression, numbness, insensitivity, concern about being treated differently from others
- **Thoughts** - e.g., inability to function normally or think clearly, inability to focus, inability to complete homework, confusion, nightmares



- **Physical sensations/symptoms** - e.g., fatigue, inability to sleep, trembling, nausea, sighing, headache, stomach-aches, increased or decreased appetite, heartache, low resistance to colds and flu, preoccupied with any changes in body functions and fear of being sick
- **Behaviours** - e.g., lashing out, crying, hyperactivity, withdrawal, a need to check in on surviving family members, missing school, regression, aggression, running out of classroom
- **Social interaction** - e.g., withdrawal from friends/society, needing to be close to a safe adult, difficulty being in a group or crowd, alcohol or other drug use, sexual experimentation
- **Spirituality** - e.g., asking questions about the meaning of life, faith, what happens after death? feeling a sense of inner peace or relief or anger

The Resources section identifies resources for gaining a theoretical understanding of grief.

Grief is a personal reaction that is rooted in culture, beliefs, and value systems. People grieve in different ways.

Many factors significantly influence the grieving process for students:

- age, cognitive ability, and developmental level
- personality and emotional maturity
- gender differences
- communication patterns in the family
- amount and kind of social support available
- family's cultural and religious beliefs and practices
- relationship with the person that died
- nature of the death
- life experiences

One of the myths of our society is that it is possible to insulate children from the traumas of loss, death, bereavement, and grief.

After a death or tragedy, students have the same basic need to make sense of the world and their place in it as adults do. Therefore, it is important to speak honestly, simply and authentically when talking to young people about loss and grief.

## Death

Children of all ages are very sensitive to the world around them. They look at life and death and try to understand what it is about. They witness a great deal of death in the media (e.g. on news broadcasts, films, and television). They may be left with the impression that violent death is normal. They pick up nuances and overtones of events and conversations even if they do not fully understand them. When children are faced with tragedy in their lives they may not have role models on which to rely. They recognize that these topics make the adults around them uncomfortable and hesitate to ask questions. Children may be shocked and overwhelmed by their strong emotional response to loss if no one has ever told them that it is normal to be upset, confused, and sad.

Family and friends can be a great source of support to the healing process offering comfort, advice, and understanding. They can check in with the person, be a supportive presence, provide a listening ear, and help create a safe place. There are also associations (teen help lines), professionals (school counsellors, psychologists), and institutions (faith communities, medical institutions) that can be of assistance. Provincial and national funeral services associations also offer information and services.

Students can learn to grow from a personal loss by:

- understanding the cyclical nature of life and the universality of death;
- developing ways of expressing the feelings and realizing that pain shared is pain diminished;
- understanding that when people die we can actively commemorate their lives;
- learning terminology that represents reality in loss situations and developing clear language that helps them name their feelings as they wonder about and discuss these situations;

- understanding that people grieve in their own ways, and that there are differences in the way people handle losses;
- recognizing and respecting the customs and beliefs of different cultures;
- understanding that help is available and that it is okay to seek help in finding ways to go on with life;
- learning how to give and receive social support in loss situations;
- developing sensitivity to the needs of grieving and of dying people.

The impact of loss or death on a student may lead to:

- impairment of academic performance;
- reduction of the student's attention span;
- behaviour problems such as attention-seeking, acting-out, aggressive or withdrawn behaviour;
- apathy, depression;
- complaints of illness or pain that seem to lack any physical cause.



When children are not given correct information on what has happened they will create their own story.

## School Community

“Not only do we grieve as individuals, we grieve as communities. Our lives are so intertwined that each of us is affected by a death in our community.” **John Morgan**

Schools/boards have official statements and policies that educators must follow in times of tragedy. The principal, teacher (along with the class), school staff, and community members have an important role to play in loss and grief situations. A student cannot put grief aside while at school; he/she needs the opportunity to integrate the grief into all aspects of life, including school.

At school, students learn behaviours and how to express emotions. Educators interact with students, and as such, have a unique opportunity to support students as they deal with instances of loss and grief. This support might take place with a small group, or in a class, or in a larger school setting. In times of grief and loss, students may be helped by the stability that a school routine provides.

Educators can respond to students, using age-appropriate language to talk about the situation. Students need language to be able to understand that:

- people respond in a variety of ways to death and dying;
- various cultures have different beliefs about death;
- people honour the dead in different ways.

Educators know how profoundly a student's home life affects his/her school life. Principals and teachers can also take an active role in establishing communication between the family and the school community.

When a death occurs in the school community, educators should:

- follow school/board protocols;
- use judgement to address the needs of the students;
- seek the advice of support staff in their educational community;
- be aware of their own limitations and refer students to professionals when necessary;
- be aware and responsive to students when tasks used in the class; may evoke memories or other reactions.

School personnel interact with students in a variety of settings. All staff (e.g., administrators, teachers, secretaries, custodians, educational assistants) can support students as they deal with issues of loss and grief, as appropriate.

The **principal** takes the lead in responding when a death or tragedy occurs. The principal is responsible for the well being of a student experiencing a death or a tragedy and should respond with compassion to others affected by the student's loss, e.g., family members, siblings, peers.

The principal should be familiar with the characteristics of grief in the age groups within their school communities and with some of the strategies they can employ. The principal should also be aware of the school- or community-based professional supports that are in place for students, and help provide access as needed.

### *Principals can:*

- meet with their school team and collaboratively outline each member's responsibility;
- decide how students and classes should be informed;
- inform:
  - school board personnel, including trustees;
  - persons directly associated with the school (teachers, support staff);
  - contact person in ethnic/cultural community;
  - neighbouring schools, if appropriate;
  - previous school(s) attended by student, or school where teacher or staff member worked;
- establish a designate to act as contact with the family. In event of a death, find out family wishes (e.g., if they want members of the school community to attend services). Someone should take the responsibility for finding out what behaviours are appropriate for families from a specific culture and ways people who are not of that belief can react respectfully (e.g., should flowers be sent, should people visit);
- prepare a written announcement. Teachers can share this announcement with students in the classroom. It should be factual, containing the nature of the event, and how the event is related to the school community (e.g., *Mr. Singh, grade 5 teacher died after a lengthy illness*). Do not use the public address system to deliver this information;
- prepare an announcement to give to each family in the school community. This could include: circumstances, the name of the deceased (if applicable), the relation to the school, and other pertinent information (e.g., details of the funeral);
- send a letter or announcement to parents/guardians with information about a loss. The school administrator should follow board protocol regarding such communication. Permission should always be obtained from the grieving family before releasing information. Letters should include any information about ways to send condolences that might be appropriate, e.g., *"The \_\_\_\_\_ family has informed us of the following details regarding the funeral arrangements:..."*;
- hold a follow-up staff meeting to share up-to-date information (e.g., meet at the end of the day to evaluate the situation and develop further strategies);
- lower the flag to half-mast when a student or teacher has died;
- identify students and/or staff in need of further support, and arrange for that support through board and/or community resources.

**Teachers** have a key role in loss and grief. Because of their daily interactions with students, they are often the first to become aware of situations involving loss and grief. Students often feel comfortable talking with their teacher, which can help provide an outlet for them to share their grief.

### *Teachers can:*

- promote a climate of openness with opportunities for questions and answers to help classmates respond appropriately;
- foster empathy in the classroom, and assist other students in responding to those in need;
- provide an environment that is safe, respectful, non-judgmental, and caring;
- look for “teachable moments” (unanticipated events in life offer potential for developing useful educational insights). These occur when an opportunity to teach students about life and death arises through events happening around them;
- recognize that every student is an individual, and must be allowed to grieve in their own way;
- be aware of cultural sensitivities, and help students to be aware of culturally appropriate behaviour;
- explain clearly that death is not something that the student caused; it is a natural happening;
- maintain a professional relationship with parents and guardians, one that is based on mutual trust and respect;
- pay close attention to the student(s) experiencing grief and loss, and support them, as appropriate;
- be encouraging and supportive by providing opportunities for emotional expression, e.g., through art, writing, drama, or physical activity.
- recognize emotional and behavioural changes, follow up with parents, and access professional assistance, if necessary;
- be cognizant of the variety of resources available locally and nationally to students and their families.

Teachers should recognize that:

- Grief is the natural response to a loss and is influenced by earlier experiences.
- Students are exposed to a great deal of death through the media which may negatively impact their knowledge.
- Students are aware of loss, death, and grief. They reach this awareness from coping with incidents such as family changes, illnesses, serious physical injury, violence and the fear of violence, and the loss of security. Students' understanding of loss and grief undergoes changes as they acquire new information and question old beliefs and understanding.
- Students take their cues from adults, e.g., they perceive emotional tones and the reality behind the words.
- Some students do not have enough support in their home and friends to provide them the safety to grieve. Adolescents, particularly, may seek solutions outside their own home and the school can provide this valuable support.
- Some people grieve with the social support of family and friends. Others need short-term interventions of grief groups or grief counsellors. Information about professional help should be made available to parents and older students, if requested.
- People do not get over the loss of a loved one. They accommodate the loss. They learn to live in a new way.

Some students express grief easily and openly while others hide their feelings.



## General Guidelines for Supporting Grieving Students

- **Be a good observer.** A student's behaviour can be very telling about their emotions. Communicate with parents/guardians and support staff. Monitor how students are progressing.
- **Be a good listener.** What grieving students need most is for someone to listen and to understand them – not to talk at them. Instead of worrying about what to say, try to create opportunities for students to talk about their loss. Listen for underlying feelings that they are expressing. Students may not have the vocabulary to express clearly what they are feeling. Don't rush with explanations. It could be helpful to ask exploratory questions rather than to supply set answers.
- **Be patient.** Grief is not always typical or obvious in students.
- **Be honest.** Use simple and direct language. Share accurate information and correct terminology. For example, death is death, not "sleeping." Say "I don't know" when you don't know.
- **Be flexible.** Maintain routines and boundaries, yet provide flexibility around homework and assignments.
- **Be available.** Students need to know that they can count on the adults in their lives to listen to and support them. When students want to talk, give them your undivided attention. This will let them know that you value what they say, and that their grieving is important.
- **Be aware of your own feelings.** Speak to other colleagues and support staff.

## Indicators of need for additional support

Educators should be aware of student behaviours that indicate the need for additional support:

- Persistent denial of the death
- Physically assaulting others
- Persistent anger towards everyone
- Pervasive depression/isolation
- Prolonged feelings of guilt/responsibility for death
- Excessive misbehavior
- Cruelty to animals
- Persistent lack of interest in any activity
- Drug/alcohol use
- Frequent panic/anxiety attacks
- Threats of suicide
- Severe fear of school
- Persistent complaints of physical illness without organic findings

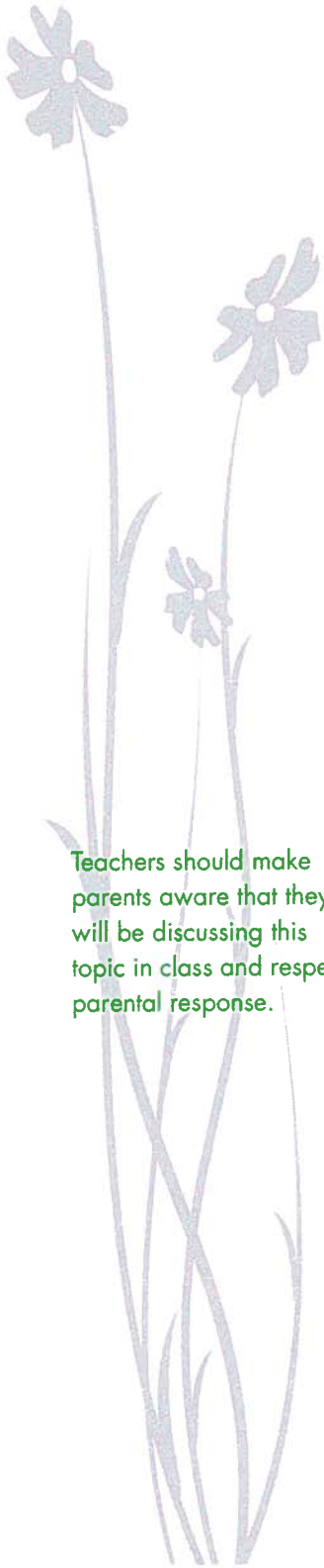
## Supporting Specific Age Groups

Students develop and learn at their own individual pace. How they deal with loss and grief is influenced by their developmental level, any past experiences with loss and grief, and their cultural beliefs. Each student's response to grief is different.

Teachers can use these suggestions when responding to a situation that has occurred in their school community or proactively when they see an opportunity to prepare the students for situations that may occur in the future.

Some students may be very open in sharing family information, gently suggest that their grieving family may want their privacy respected.





Teachers should make parents aware that they will be discussing this topic in class and respect parental response.

## Junior and Senior Kindergarten

Students in Junior and Senior Kindergarten are usually egocentric, curious, and very literal. They rely on touch, movement, and physical manipulation of projects. They have a growing sense of community but may not comprehend 'forever' or the finality of death.

Students are helped by teachers who understand that there are no right or wrong feelings to the changes they experience in life. Allow students to express different feelings regarding changes in their lives. For example, a move to a new home may be an exciting and happy experience for one student, while for another it may be a sad experience. It is important to listen carefully to their questions and comments in order to understand correctly what they are asking or sharing.

Grieving is part of the life journey. There is no determined or set timeline to follow in moving through the grieving process. Be flexible, as not every student deals with loss and grief in the same way.

## Task Changes

- Introduce the topic of changes by discussing how students feel about the snow melting and it no longer being there at the end of winter. Together describe the changes that begin to happen when the days get warmer and longer and the snow is gone. Invite comments of how they feel about the changes taking place.
- Point out that changes happen in our lives – some changes make us happy and some changes make us sad.
- Talk about changes that make them happy or sad. Examples:
  - We grow new teeth.
  - We move and leave our friends.
  - We move and meet new friends.
  - A new family moves into our neighbourhood.
  - We get a new teacher.
  - Our pet dies.
- Invite students to think about one change they can remember in their own lives. Have them draw a picture of that change and put a happy or a sad face beside it.
- Have volunteers share their pictures and display them.

Remind students that grieving friends might not want them to share their thoughts with others.

## Teachable Moments

Be aware of any students who have recently experienced death in their own family.

Death is one of the changes that take place in all living persons and things.

Be very gentle and basic when talking about death.


- Discuss changes that take place at different times of year. When discussing autumn, note that many aspects of nature change and die. Say: In nature we see patterns of how nature changes as we move from autumn toward winter. Many birds fly south. Some animals prepare winter homes. Some creatures of nature die because they are no longer able to live. If students are ready, connect this idea to death in people.
- Read a story that includes the death of a friend, neighbour, or family member. Invite comments or questions from the students. Be prepared to discuss answers to questions such as:
  - What is death?
  - What happens when a person dies?
  - Why do people die?
  - Who takes care of us when someone dies?
  - How would I feel?
- Read a story about someone who is sick for a long time. Discuss ways we can help someone who is very sick. (*We can visit them; we can draw pictures or make cards for them.*)
- Introduce the concept of asking for help or supporting others who have experienced a loss, using a film clip. Emphasize that it is important to reach out for help when we need it.

## Grades 1 to 3

Students in Grades 1 to Grade 3 usually believe in cause and effect. They are more able to share feelings and talk more openly about loss and grief. They often weave magic and fantasy into their thoughts and explanations of the world around them. They may not understand their feelings and may not be able to verbalize what is happening around them. They sometimes think that loss is caused by bad acts and assume that they said or did something that caused the death of someone close to them.

Curiosity about death may be intense especially regarding the biological process of how life ends and how the body decomposes. Students see death on television where death is often violent or, in cartoons, where it isn't taken too seriously. The language used to describe death is vitally important in helping children understand what death is. It is important that the person who has died is not referred to as "lost" or "gone to sleep." These explanations only confuse young students more. They may wonder why the police are not working hard to find them or why no one is trying to wake them up.

Young students are helped by adults who respond to their questions/ statements and are prepared for student responses that may be considered inappropriate from the viewpoint of other students or adults. Students who are grieving need information about their concerns. They may want to know actual facts about the death process.



Teachers should make parents aware that they will be discussing this topic in class and respect parental response.

Students need to have the correct information to understand death and dying. It is important that they not be confused; they should not struggle with the extra stress of misunderstanding terminology.

It may be necessary to clarify the difference between emotions and behaviour.

Young students do not understand fully that death is irreversible, final, universal, or inevitable. They need to know that losses can be made bearable; and that it is healthy to grieve.

Students need assurance that if they are angry, sad, or feel physically sick; they won't be rejected, abandoned, or shamed. Students who consistently react in a strong emotional manner may need additional support.

### **TASK** A Story Character is Sad

- Discuss feelings as a class, using a web/concept map.
- Students individually complete a worksheet showing four picture frames with ovals for drawing faces with different expressions. Remind students that all feelings are acceptable (although some behaviours may not be).
- Discuss attachment and have students make a list of people that they are close to (family members, relatives, neighbours, classmates, etc.).
- Point out that we are sad or disappointed when something happens to break these attachments (e.g., a friend moves away, we change schools, a neighbour dies).
- Read a story about loss such as one about a best friend moving away or an accidental death.
- Discuss the feelings of the child in the story. Point out that it is okay to be sad. Ask: How did \_\_\_\_\_ feel? How do you know? Why do you think \_\_\_\_ felt \_\_\_\_.
- Role-play to re-enact the story. Guiding questions could include: What would you say or do if you were \_\_\_\_\_? What would you say or do to comfort \_\_\_\_\_?
- Brainstorm names of people who are available to help and describe how these people can help. Have students share an experience of a time when they helped or were helped by someone. Point out that the pain of experiencing a death gets easier if we can talk about it.



- Discuss people who can help you when you need it. On a worksheet showing four boxes students draw and/or write about people who can help when you are upset or frightened. Develop a large graphic organizer with the class to show a selection of the people/groups who are available when they need help. Student volunteers can suggest times when some of these people helped them.
- Make a class bouquet of good wishes – paper flowers with wishes written or drawn on them.

Remind students that grieving friends might not want them to share their thoughts with others.

### Teachable Moments

- Ask open-ended questions: What is loss? What does loss mean to you? What are different kinds of loss that people have? How might somebody feel if... Have students complete statements such as “I feel sad when...”; “I feel upset when...”
- Talk about how it is okay to feel sad at one moment, and happy at another. Students make paper puppet pals with a happy face on one side and a sad face on the other. They use the puppets to express feelings and role-play.
- Discuss ways we remember someone we miss (e.g., through pictures, gifts received, videos, special places, talking about them). Brainstorm helpful ideas in a grief and loss situation. Have students create a collage: “I Remember...” or “How to Help Someone Who Feels Sad.”

A memory book/box can help students to process their grief and put energy into creating new and healthy relationships.

Different responses are acceptable as everyone deals with change (loss) in a variety of ways.

- Have students draw or write about their own happy memories of a friend or relative who died. Plan a memorial to commemorate the death. Students could bring in pictures of people they would like to remember and share why they were special.
- Create a memory book/box to help students keep memories alive and close to them; include objects, photographs, etc. Students write a happy memory message for the memory book or box.
- Go for a nature walk and spend time reflecting on loss and grief. Plant seeds and watch them grow. Be creative with containers. Plant a tree in remembrance of the loss.
- Explain how physical activity can be a good outlet when experiencing loss and grief. Students can participate in physical activity such as relay races to “run off steam.”
- Guide a discussion about feelings and how they were dealt with in a story (to reinforce that it is possible for someone to be grieving even when the person doesn't appear to be). Ask: *How could you tell that the person was grieving (crying, not sleeping, sleeping too much, not eating, eating too much, getting into trouble at school, unusual behaviour, angry)*. Students use drama/role play to express feelings from the story. Brainstorm ways to deal with sadness and anger.
- Use a book or film which provides a positive example of how the characters had to respond to change. Discuss characters' responses and extend the discussion to the students' experiences with change.
- Have students create a storyboard using four frames: an example of a loss or change; the feelings associated with it; the person(s) who helped them deal with and understand their feelings; and a happy memory with the person or thing. They can accompany their illustrations with a written or oral description.

## Grades 4 to 6

Students in Grades 4–6 may be more practical in their thinking processes and more able to understand death cognitively. They are beginning to think in terms of abstract concepts. They acknowledge that death is irreversible but advances in medical technology that halt or reverse the dying process raise questions and create some uncertainty. They may draw inappropriate conclusions from media, video games, and the Internet.

Students may be very factual about death and have many questions since their experience, especially with the death of a person, could be very limited. Giving students needed information and correct terminology is key. Students are helped by adults who answer their questions and help them feel empowered by providing appropriate facts.

- It is important to help students understand that painful losses can be grieved, integrated into life, and provide opportunities to gain skills and attitudes that enhance life.
- Teachers can help students understand that it is normal to feel uncomfortable or awkward around someone who is grieving. Students may be able to help siblings and friends grieve more fully if they have language to give voice to their feelings.

Teachers should make parents aware that they will be discussing this topic in class and respect parental response.



Encourage students to include people places and things where they see fit. They do not have to justify their decisions or be pressured into having certain people in the circles closest to them.

### **TASK** Attachments

- Ask students what attachment means. Together, decide on a definition (*a feeling that binds one to a person or thing*).
- Ask students to think about all the people, places, and things that are important to them. Using concentric circles with ME in the centre circle, students write about or draw people places or things important to them. The circle closest to the centre should reflect who/what is closest to them.
- Invite them to share their work, guided by questions such as: What or who did you put in the circle with you? ...closest to you? ...furthest from you?
- Ask: Did anyone put this person (e.g., a grandparent) in a different circle?
- Invite students to tell about one of their close connections (by retelling an anecdote or describing a memento from a loved one).
- Summarize by discussing closeness, connections, and attachments. Point out that it is these attachments that make us grieve when they are broken. Volunteers may be able to relate a story about a connection and/or a loss.

Remind students that grieving friends might not want them to share their thoughts with others.

## Teachable Moments

- Students can explore feelings through the Arts. They could draw, sculpt, or use other creative media to illustrate their feelings. They could create a collage: “I Remember...” or “How We Can Help Someone Who Feels Sad.” Some might prefer to use drama or role play to express ideas about feelings.
- Plan a “Memory Day” when students bring in mementos of people they would like to remember and share why the people were special.
- Create a memory book/box to help students keep memories alive and close to them while at the same time allowing them to move on and create new and healthy relationships. Students illustrate a happy memory they experienced with this special person.
- Go for a nature walk and spend time reflecting on loss and grief. Plant a tree or a garden in remembrance of the loss.
- Explain to students that physical activity can be a good outlet when experiencing loss and grief. Have the class participate in physical activity, such as a soccer game or relay race.
- Discuss sad situations which a friend or classmate could be experiencing. For example: Your friend’s mother has been sick for a long time. This morning your friend is not at school and your teacher explains that your friend’s mother has died.
- Read a story:
  - about someone who has died and have students share feelings and thoughts about how to deal with death and grief.
  - which provides an example of how the characters had to respond to change and did so in a positive way.
  - that deals with a character’s grief.


Discuss responses. Students prepare a book review that focuses on the grieving process and the character’s feelings as he/she moved on.

- Use a variety of forms of writing, including journals, to express their feelings, clarify their ideas, ask questions, and record thoughts/sayings. If appropriate, respond to journal entries. Have students share their ideas/feelings in a letter or a sympathy card, even if it is not sent.
- Discuss and practise, through role-play, how to make a phone call, knock on the door, or what to say in the school yard the first time you see a friend after they have had a significant loss. Point out that it is not necessary to do a lot of talking in these situations. Just say “I’m sorry” and be yourself. You might say a few words about how you feel or talk about your favourite memory of that person or a special time you shared.
- Make a Good Grief book in which each student writes a suggestion for helping themselves or someone else during periods of grief (e.g., taking a walk with a friend). The book could be done in poetic form with illustrations.
- Talk about why it is important to be a good listener and to keep in touch with a bereaved friend. Students can collaborate as a class to list simple practical ways to help, such as walk with the friend to school, bring homework to them.

## Grades 7 to 8

Students in Grades 7 and 8 can incorporate abstract thought and reasoning into their understanding but sometimes may act out in a search for meaning. They may feel that maintaining relationships and obtaining approval from peers are central to their sense of well-being. When dealing with grief, some adolescents may project their own feelings of helplessness by ignoring the subject of the loss entirely. Bereaved adolescents face the formidable challenge of receiving the support they need in their grief, while simultaneously trying to maintain their independence from adults and avoiding alienation from their peers by being branded as different. Adolescent grief support groups can play an invaluable role as buffers between the adult world and their peers; providing safe havens for their grief.

Students can be supported by teachers who are good observers as a student's behaviour will give clues to his/her emotions. Grief is not always typical or obvious with adolescent students. They need to know that they can count on the adults in their lives to listen to them and support them. Teachers should use simple and direct language and ask exploratory questions rather than supply set answers. They need to understand that



Teachers should make parents aware that they will be discussing this topic in class and respect parental response.

losses come from a variety of different things not just from a death. Losses could include moving, divorce/separation, social exclusion, abusive relationship at home or with peers, or a significant life change.

When a person is grieving his/her energies are often low and it is difficult to reach out for the support and help. One of the most helpful ways to journey in one's grief is to be able to tell the story when it is comfortable to do so and the time is right.

### **TASK** Expressing Loss

- Discuss: What is grief? What are some of the ways in which individuals suffer loss and grief?
- Brainstorm and list ways that people tend to respond to losses, both positively and negatively.
- Pose the question: How do you deal with a loss or grief?
- Students could draw, sculpt, or use other creative media to illustrate their feelings. Some might prefer to use drama or role play to express ideas about feelings.

Remind students that grieving friends might not want them to share their thoughts with others.

### **Teachable Moments**

- Students choose three songs or pieces of music that reflect different emotions. Some students may prefer to write a piece of music (instrumental and/or with lyrics) to express these emotions. Ask: How does each one express that emotion? Share as a class. Respond, if appropriate.



- Read a poem about loss. Ask: Why was the poem written? What kind of loss/pain was experienced?
- Students write a poem to express personal loss or feelings that might be experienced in a situation of loss.
- Plan a memorial to commemorate a loss in a positive way. Students could illustrate a happy memory they experienced with this special person. They could include stories or photographs. Some students might create a memorial webpage, an electronic tribute involving peers, or a computer slide-show including images that speak to loss and grief. This tribute could be presented at a school assembly.
- Explain to students how physical activity can be a good outlet when experiencing loss and grief. Encourage students to make a list of appropriate physical activities. As a class, choose an activity that they can organize and participate in.
- Brainstorm names/titles of people who are available in times of trouble and describe how these people can help. Invite students to share an experience when they helped or were helped by someone. Students can research community services and compile information into a booklet. Working in small groups, they write and illustrate one page of this helpful booklet.
- As a class, compile a reading list of books/movies that include characters who dealt with death and grief. Discuss the ways that these characters worked through the grief process.
- Have students write a letter or a story to express thoughts and feelings. Others could create a sympathy card, writing a message inside. Share some examples of appropriate sympathy cards and messages with them.
- Invite students to survey their family members about how death and grieving are respected in their faith tradition and culture. Students decide how they will share the information.

A memory book/box can help students to process their grief and put energy into creating new and healthy relationships.

- Share the story of Christopher Reeves and his limited physical health after the accident which left him a quadriplegic or people limited by Parkinson's disease, such as Michael J. Fox or the late Pope John Paul II. Discuss how loss can be experienced through illness that does not necessarily lead to death.
- Situations in local and world news or in the school community may provide opportunities for discussion of loss and grief. For example:
  - A new boy comes into the class. He is from the part of Indonesia where a Tsunami struck. He came to Canada with his parents but an older brother was swept away and is presumed dead.
  - You heard on the news that there was a bad accident last night. When you get to school this morning, you learn that a classmate's cousin was killed.

## Grades 9 to 12

Students in Grades 9–12 can have a great awareness of possibilities and the devastation felt after a loss. They can be more thorough in their exploration of issues and problems and more theoretical, idealistic, and sophisticated. They might be interested in the ideal, the probable, and non-physical, and be preoccupied with concepts such as soul, eternity, death, etc. As students grow in their sense of autonomy, they often question things that they previously accepted without question.

These students are developing their sense of inner responsibility; their coping strategies become more systematic; they sometimes see themselves as invincible. They are able to incorporate abstract thought and reasoning into their understanding of death and continue to grow in their understanding of the universality of death. Bereaved students face the formidable challenge of receiving the support they need, while simultaneously trying to maintain their independence from adults and avoid being branded as different by their peers. Grief support groups can play an invaluable role, providing safe havens for their grief.

Teachers should make parents aware that they will be discussing this topic in class and respect parental response.



Students are supported by teachers who remember that relationships are a central concern and loss of peer respect is a source of anxiety.

### **TASK** We All React Differently

- There is no right way to express sympathy to people who have experienced the death of a loved one, but it does show respect to the family when you care enough to respect their beliefs. Together list some of the faith traditions with which students are familiar.
- Working in small groups, students research to collect data about beliefs associated with death as held by one or more of these faith traditions. They can research information on:
  - understanding the nature of death
  - beliefs about the afterlife, reincarnation, etc.
  - ritual celebrations and practices about death and funerals
  - mourning practices and ways of supporting others in time of loss.
- Students can incorporate video clips, electronic slide presentations, charts and diagrams, drama, and/or mock interviews into their presentations. Encourage them to be respectful yet creative and remind them that this is not a time for humour or critical comparison.
- Student groups make presentations to the class.
- Students write an entry in their journals, reflecting on the importance of understanding and respecting the diversity of ways in which various cultures and faith traditions experience the grieving process associated with the death of a loved one.

Remind students that grieving friends might not want them to share their thoughts with others.

## Teachable Moments

- Students might draw, sculpt, or use other creative media to illustrate their feelings. Have students create a collage/poster titled “I Remember...”
- Invite a local elder or spiritual leader to the classroom to talk about the role of their culture, spirituality, and community with regards to the healing process.
- Have students reflect on: What is grief? How do people deal with grief in your culture? How does your culture facilitate mourning? What are some of the various ways in which individuals suffer loss and grief? Have students choose music that reflects their feelings. They might compose a piece of music (instrumental or with lyrics).
- Plan a memorial to commemorate a death. Have students bring in pictures of people they would like to remember and have them share why these people were special.
- Students could create a memory book/box or an electronic presentation. Each person in the class could contribute a “memory” message. Some could create a computer slide-show including images that speak to loss and grief that could be presented at a school assembly. As an alternative, students could participate in a social networking site that pays tribute to the friend or classmate.
- Explain to students how physical activity can be a good outlet when experiencing loss and grief. Encourage students to participate in physical activity such as a staff/student soccer game. They could list physical activities that might be good outlets for individual students to participate in.
- As a class, prepare a suggested reading list that might include:
  - texts that provide examples of how characters had to respond to change and did so in a positive way. Students discuss their responses.

A memory book/box can help students to process their grief and put energy into creating new and healthy relationships.

Students follow school/board guidelines and use appropriate Internet safeguards.

- fiction texts about someone who has died. Students share feelings and thoughts about how to deal with death and grief.
- non-fiction texts that demonstrate young people who approached others to cope with feelings after a tragic accident. Students compile a list of community agencies.
- Students write a poem or essay on the healing effects of forgiveness and the harmful effects of guilt.
- Brainstorm people who are available to help in times of trouble and describe how these people can help. Invite students to share an experience when they helped or were helped by someone. They research the supports available in the community for people who have experienced different types of loss and grief:
  - the death of a loved one;
  - a missing child;
  - a chronically ill person;
  - a tragic accident.
- Share the story of Christopher Reeves and his limited physical health after the accident which left him a quadriplegic or people limited by Parkinson's disease, such as Michael J. Fox or the late Pope John Paul II. Discuss how loss can be experienced through illness that does not necessarily lead to death.

## Awareness of Cultural Diversity

Canada is a country rich with diverse cultural and religious traditions and beliefs. Within each community, cultural, and religious group, families and individuals may vary in their internal beliefs as well as the external rituals. These differences may extend between geographical regions of this vast country.

Educators can indicate respect and support in a culturally sensitive way to students and their families by being open to learning about their beliefs and rituals.

Some sources for getting information about cultural traditions are available from multicultural liaison personnel in school boards, leaders from the student's cultural community, local funeral homes, on the Internet, and in board and public libraries.



To better understand the child's culture and to identify ways in which the school community can best support both the child and family, educators could ask questions such as:

- How do people in this cultural community demonstrate their feelings of grief?
- What things will people in this cultural community be doing to support the family right now? Over the next few months?
- What is expected of the student at home during this time? At the funeral/memorial? In the coming year?
- How do we best offer our support to the family? Is it appropriate to send flowers? cards? letters? to visit the home? to attend the funeral?
- Is it acceptable for students or teachers to come to the funeral/memorial?
- What is expected of children who attend?
- What is the proper attire to wear to the funeral/memorial? Is there anything to be aware of in advance?

It is important to note that most people, regardless of faith, are generally tolerant and accepting of slight indiscretions. Although there is no right way to express sympathy to people who have lost a loved one, it does show great respect to the family when you care enough to respect their beliefs. Above anything else, that you might say or give, this one small concession of "learning beforehand" may be your greatest show of love and sympathy.



## Resources

Included are a few of the many resources available for teachers and students on the subjects of loss, grief, and growth. Consult your board or local librarians and/or the Internet for further suggestions.

### For Teachers

#### Publications

Christ, Grace Hyslop. *Healing Children's Grief: Surviving a Parent's Death from Cancer*. Don Mills ON: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Eaton Russell, C. *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children and Teenagers*. 2007.

Goldman, Linda. *Breaking the Silence* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. *A Guide to Helping Children with Complicated grief – Suicide, Homicide, Aids, Violence and Abuse*. Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2001.

Goldman, Linda. *Great Answers to Difficult Questions about Death: What Children Need to Know*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009.

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Grollman, Earl. *Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996.

Gross, Cathy, McKeever, Sharron and Takacs Debly, Mary Ann. *Dealing with Loss and Grief*. Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2006.



## RESOURCES

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- Hoff, Joan Schweizer, et al. *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers*. Portland, OR: The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, 1998.
- Hospice Calgary. *Good Grief. Supporting the Bereaved Student: A Resource Guide for Educators*.
- Kanyer, Laurie. *25 Things to Do When Grandpa Passes Away, Mom and Dad Get Divorced, or the Dog Dies: Activities to Help Children Heal After a Loss or Change*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, 2003.
- Klicker, R. L. *A Student Dies, A School Mourns: Dealing with Death and Loss in the School Community*. Taylor & Francis Group, Florence, KY, 2000.
- Ross, Cheri Barton. *Pet Loss and Children: Establishing a Healthy Foundation*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Saunders, L. *What We Don't Discuss: A Teacher's Guide to Death and Dying*. Pacific Edge Publishing. Gabriola, BC, 2007.
- Silverman, Phyllis Rolfe. *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children's Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Silverman, Phyllis & Kelly, Madelyn. *A Parent's Guide to Raising Grieving Children: Rebuilding Your Family after the Death of a Loved One*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2009.
- Sorenson, Julia. *Overcoming Loss: Activities and Stories to Help Transform Children's Grief and Loss*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008.
- Wells, Rosemary. *Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss*. London, UK: Seldon Press, 2003.
- Wolfelt, Alan. *Healing the Bereaved Child: Grief Gardening, Growth Through Grief and Other Touchstones for Caregivers*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 1997.
- Worden, Dr. J. William. – *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York: Guilford Press, 1996.

## Websites

Bereaved Families of Ontario links to local chapters

<http://www.bereavedfamilies.net/>

Hospice Calgary

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

Ontario Funeral Service Association [www.ofsa.org](http://www.ofsa.org)

Questions and Answers

[http://www.ofsa.org/Questions\\_and\\_Answers\\_5491.html](http://www.ofsa.org/Questions_and_Answers_5491.html)

Robert's Press: Canada's Grief Resource Centre

<http://www.robertspress.ca/>

Understanding Cultural Issues in Death

[http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/culture\\_death.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/culture_death.aspx)

## For Students

### Publications

Alexander Green, A.K. *A Mural for Mamita/Un Mural Para Mamita*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2002.

Babbitt, Natalie. *Tuck Everlasting*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975. (movie 2002)

Britain, Lory. *My Grandma Died: A Child's Story about Death and Loss*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, 2002.

Brown, L. K. & Brown, M. *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death*. Boston, MA. Little, Brown & Company, 1996.

Bunting, Eve. *Rudi's Pond*. New York: Clarion Books, 1999.

Carney, K.L. *Together We'll Get Through This: Learning to Cope with Loss and Transition*. Wethersfield, CT: Dragonfly Publishing, 1997.

(First of the Barkley and Eve Activity and Colouring Book series)

Coerr, Eleanor. *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. New York, NY: Puffin Books, 1999.

Crawford, B.B. and Lazar, L. *In My World: A Journal for Young People Facing Life-Threatening Illness*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 1999.

Czech, Jan. *The Garden Angel: A Young Child Discovers a Grandparent's Love Grows Even After Death*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2000.

Goldman, L. *Children Also Grieve: Talking about Death and Healing*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005.

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- Grollman, E. *A Child's Book about Death*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2001.
- A Child's Book about Burial and Cremation* Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2001.
- A Child's Book about Funerals and Cemeteries* Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2001.
- Hemery, K.M. *Not Just a Fish*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2000.
- Holmes, M.M. *A Terrible Thing Happened: A Story for Children Who Have Witnessed Violence or Trauma*. Washington, DC: Magination Press, 2000.
- Keller, Hellen, Shattuck, Roger, and Herrmann, Dorothy. *The Story of My Life: The Restored Classic*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004.
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- McNamara, J.W. *My Mom is Dying: A Child's Diary*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994.
- Marshall, B. *Animal Crackers: A Tender Book about Death and Funerals and Love*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 1998.
- Munsch, Robert. *Love You Forever*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 1986.
- Olivieri, Laura. *Where Are You?: A Child's Book about Loss*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2007.
- Palmer, Pat. *I Wish I Could Hold Your Hand...: A Child's Guide to Grief and Loss*. UK: Little Imp, 2000.
- Paterson, K. *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: HarperCollins, 1977. (movie 2007)
- Pausch, Randy. *The Last Lecture*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2008.
- Pitzer, S. *Grandfather Hurant Lives Forever*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2001.
- Quinn, Patricia. *Tiger Flowers*. Toronto: Lester Publishing Limited, 1994.
- Schweibert, P., & DeKlyen, C. *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss*. Grief Watch. Portland, OR, 1999.
- Silverstein, Shel. *The Giving Tree*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers. 1986.
- Tiffault, B.W. *A Quilt for Elizabeth*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 1992.
- White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: HarperCollins, 1974 (movie 2007)

Wolfelt, Alan. *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2001.

Yeomans, Ellen. *Lost and Found: Remembering a Sister*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation, 2000.

### Websites

Kids Help Phone (sections on coping with grief and loss)  
<http://www.kidshelpphone.ca> or talk to a phone counselor at 1-800-668-6868)

PBS Kids: Dealing with Death: So Many Questions  
<http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/emotions/death/index.html>

KidsHealth: When Somebody Dies  
<http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/somedie.html>  
 Somebody in My Friend's Family Died. What Should I Do?  
[http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/friend/family\\_friend\\_died.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/friend/family_friend_died.html)

Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood: Family Communications: Helping Young Children with Death  
<http://www.fci.org/viewproject.asp?ID=%7BEE8B56D3-08CF-44E6-BEA7-3D2B31407AB4%7D>

### Films

*Blizzard*. DVD. LeVar Burton. 2003. Toronto: Knight'scove Entertainment.

*Carved from the Heart: a portrait of grief, healing, and community*. DVD. Ellen Frankenstein and Louise Brady. 1997. USA: Fanlight Productions.

*Fly Away Home*. DVD. Carroll Ballard. 1996. New York: Columbia Pictures.

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*Lorenzo's Oil*. DVD. George Miller. 1992. Hollywood, CA: Universal Pictures.

*Sleepless in Seattle*. DVD. Nora Ephron. 1993. New York: TriStar Pictures.



## Acknowledgements

The Ontario Funeral Service Association, the Ontario Board of Funeral Services, and the Funeral Services Association of Canada developed this resource as a support for educators. We would like to thank the following for their valued contributions to this project.

Dr. John Morgan, PhD who conducted the initial research and wrote the original version of the resource.

Milton Orris, MA who originally facilitated the design of the project and worked with Dr. Morgan during the development of the resource.

Richard J. Paul, BA, BEd, who chaired the Loss, Grief & Growth Education Project for five years, and worked diligently to make the vision for this resource a reality.

A special thank you to all the educators who provided advice and direction throughout the project.

## Feedback

We welcome any comments that you have. Please email us at [info@fsac](mailto:info@fsac).