Death education, as well as its partner in taboo subjects, sex education, has been introduced into the college curriculum within the past 10-15 years. Still, one of the primary concerns of students is where to go on campus for support and information when a death occurs without having to take a class on the subject. Students often regard the counseling service or mental health service on campus as a place to go for serious psychological problems, not to talk about their grief over a death. Campus ministry is sometimes sought out. Parents are less often sought out due to the student’s need to become independent from past authorities. Students are hesitant to burden their friends with this “uncool stuff” for fear of making a fool of themselves. This is a major issue for students in need.

A second issue for students is what has been described as the third task of mourning, dealing with a changed environment (Worden, 1991). Students who have to drop out due to a death and return to school find it difficult to explain to their peers and teachers why they have been absent. Other members of the university community also have difficulty in knowing what to say to someone who has experienced a painful death of a family member or friend. Students may feel “weird” for being in the state they are in. No one seems to understand them.

A third issue is not knowing how to convince a skeptical teacher that they need time or help in making up late work, making up a missed exam or completing a dropped class.

There are a number of actions the institution can and should take when a death has occurred (Wrenn, 1999). The first step is to appoint someone to manage the media, to inform the personnel that need to be informed. A more complete list of procedures considered to be important by those most involved is:
• Announce arrangements for students, faculty, staff and officials from the college/university to attend the funeral or memorial service.
• Prepare letters of recognition, appreciation or achievement to be given to the dying student or to the family, posthumously.
• Obtain the support of the president, vice-president, dean, department head and faculty familiar with the student to convey to the family and friends that the student was important to the college.
• Establish good channels of communication between police and campus personnel.
• Arrange for professionals to be available to work with roommates, friends, and family of the deceased.
• Provide a place and time for students and others to ask questions and express sorrow, concern or anger.
• Follow up on those most affected by the death.
• Issue some public recognition of the death, such as letters to those most concerned.
• Encourage those closest to the deceased to be involved in services and other events (Wrenn, 1994).

In higher education, the size and mission of the school determines much of what takes place when a student death occurs. The annual number of expected deaths per 10,000 student enrollment is about 4.5. Even though a university with an enrollment of 30,000 students will normally have 10-20 student deaths a year, the basic assumption by most is that a single death could or should have been prevented. In fact, the expected death rate in the student age group of 18-22 for non-college students is even higher (Wrenn, 1991b).

Counseling Considerations

Once the initial shock and emotional outpouring of a sudden death has been experienced, students will often turn to others for support. Some of the counseling considerations that are important in working with people who have experienced a recent death are:
• Acknowledging the various difficulties in dealing with a changed environment and set of circumstances
• Helping the student identify his/her feelings and thoughts about the deceased
• Providing time to grieve, which friends often don’t do
• Interpreting what is normal
• Acknowledging individual differences in grieving
• Offering continued support
• Examining defenses and coping styles
• Identifying pathology for possible referral

Summary

Institutions of higher education are often not aware of the special considerations important to the management of a campus death or the counseling of those who are bereaved. Student issues focus on where one can go on campus for support, how to handle feelings that seem new and unsettling, how to approach teachers and others for understanding, and how to deal with an environment that has suddenly changed from what it was. What seems to help is for some assurance to be offered as to what is normal in this situation, how to handle guilt, anger and sorrow, and how to talk with others in passing on the bad news of a death. The institution must concern itself with finding a “point person” to help manage information from within and without the institution. Some suggested procedures have been listed. Finally, there are special considerations in counseling the bereaved that have been mentioned. References for further information are included at the end of this article.

References


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Trying to cope with university life after the death of someone close can be harrowing. But, as Huma Qureshi reports, there is a support network on campus who are just a phone call away. Most teaching staff would be expected to show a level of understanding and compassion to each individual's circumstances, but if you are requesting time off, or a postponement of deadlines, you may be required to show a medical note. If you do take time off, it is important to retain contact with your department to let them know when you are coming back in, and to organise catching up if necessary. If you need to face up to something as serious as bereavement, outside help is really very hard to come by. This Diploma in Bereavement and Grief Counselling places its focus on death and loss and goes on to explain how individuals are affected by it. The course mainly focuses on issues that concern mourning, grief and bereavement. Death, from the perspective of the person dying as well as the bereaved is looked into during the term of the course. On completion of the course, you will have the skills as well as the experience to understand, support and handle those people who are surviving a death and loss. Description. The clinical and pastoral aspects of bereavement counselling are the main aspec