



# WALKING THE BROKEN-HEARTED HOME

Responding to Critical  
Incidents in Learning  
Communities

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# TODAY'S PLAN



Introductions, welcome & Guiding Principles – 15 minutes



5 Scenarios – 1 minute to explain



2-minute stand and stretch to discuss scenario with others in room



4-minute debrief of scenario by John, Aileen and Kevin and discuss best practices.



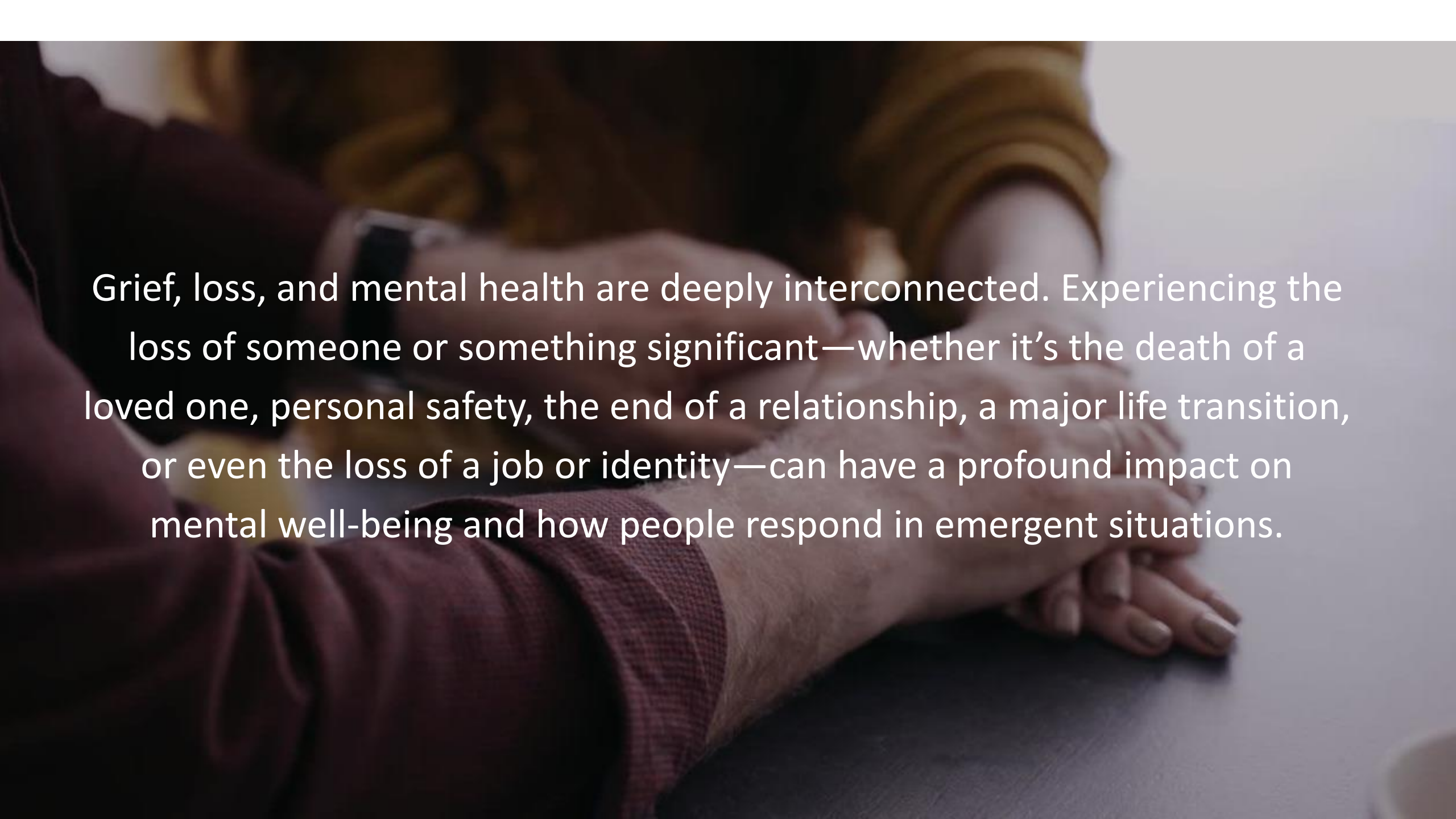
Summary, thank you and farewell – 10 minutes

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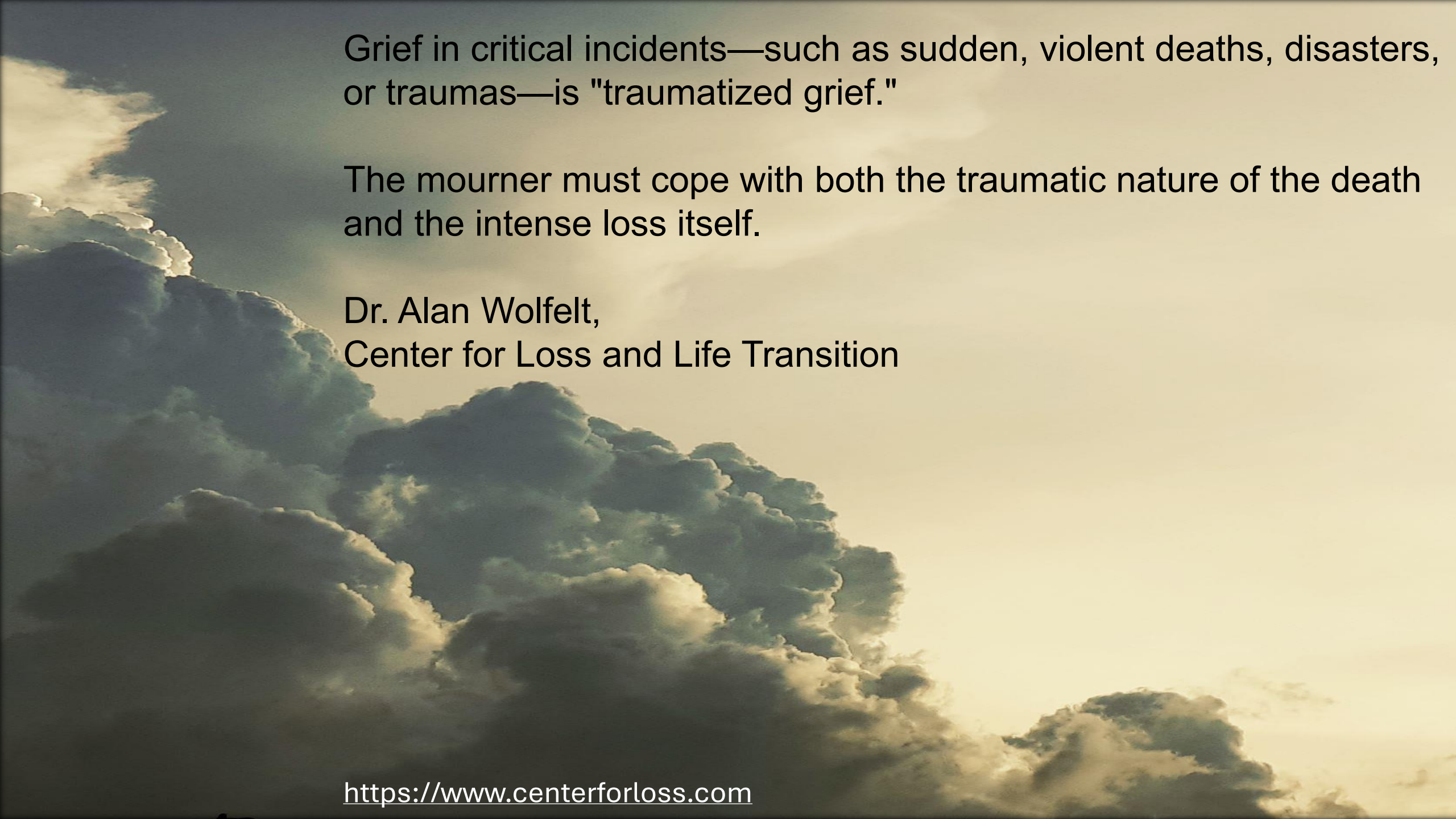
# 2 MINUTE TURN AND TALK

- Introduce yourself.
- What experience do you have with Critical Incidents?
- What do you hope to learn in the next 60 minutes?



A close-up photograph of two people's hands clasped together on a table. The person on the left is wearing a dark red, textured long-sleeved shirt. The person on the right is wearing a yellow and black patterned top. The hands are resting on a dark, textured surface, possibly a table. The background is blurred, showing a light-colored wall and a wooden chair back.

Grief, loss, and mental health are deeply interconnected. Experiencing the loss of someone or something significant—whether it's the death of a loved one, personal safety, the end of a relationship, a major life transition, or even the loss of a job or identity—can have a profound impact on mental well-being and how people respond in emergent situations.

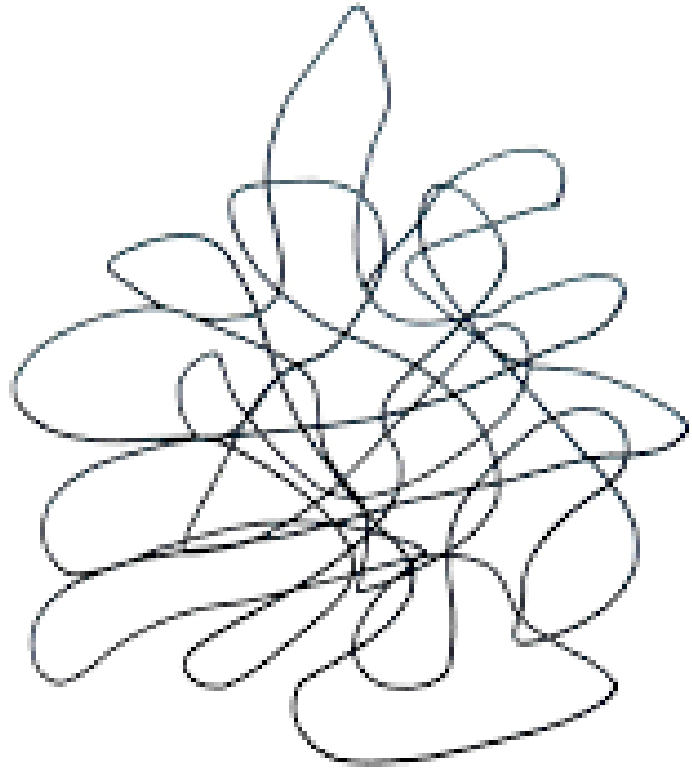


Grief in critical incidents—such as sudden, violent deaths, disasters, or traumas—is "traumatized grief."

The mourner must cope with both the traumatic nature of the death and the intense loss itself.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt,  
Center for Loss and Life Transition

<https://www.centerforloss.com>



*Grief is not linear*

# GRIEF IS NOT LINEAR

- People don't move through it in neat, predictable stages but instead revisit emotions in different ways over time. A grief journey is a personal experience..
- Feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion can resurface unexpectedly, even long after a loss, and that's a normal part of the grieving process.

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve. Student’s experiences are unique.

Grieving styles differ across cultures and individuals. Some may grieve privately, others more publicly. There’s no "right" way to grieve—what matters is that the person feels supported.

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# DYING IS A PART OF LIVING

The World Population Review estimates that each day just over 174,000 people die globally.

Schools are not separate from the broader human experiences that all people face.

Loss affects students, staff and families often in deep and varied ways, just as it does in any other community.

Schools can play an important role in supporting shareholders through grief, creating space for connection, healing and resilience.





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# PASTORAL APPROACH

- Lens in which we do our work in Catholic Schools.
- Combines psychological counselling with spiritual care.
- Involves never losing sight of the dignity and worth of each person.
- Gather, shepherding and supporting people where that are at, based on who they are.

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# GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE



- Carefully discerning the wishes of the family.
- Recognizing the uniqueness of each response.
- Be available when a community needs you (there's no timeframe or timeline).
- We are always teaching....always (even Jesus wept at the news of the death of Lazarus).



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# CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSES

As grief is not linear, nor are  
Critical Incident Responses.

The uniqueness of each  
response is found in the  
uniqueness of each school, each  
classroom of learners.

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# SCENARIO #1

You are vice principal of a midtown high school that has 1250 students. Mr. Lewiston, a seasoned English teacher in your high school was found deceased this morning by his wife.

Your principal asks you to assist in preparing an email to be sent to all staff, as well as an announcement that will be included in the lunchtime announcements. The draft that your principal has created for all staff and the corresponding announcement for students, speaks of Mr. Lewiston's contribution as a coach in the school for 22 years and his 2016 provincial championship.

Meanwhile, a large group of students have heard a rumour of Mr. Lewiston's death and are gathered at Derek's house, one of Mr. Lewiston's students. Derek's mother calls the school mid morning to say that the group of students will gather at her house today and likely tomorrow to grieve the teacher's death.

What are some key considerations for this scenario?



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# SCENARIO 1 THEMES



News of death or other upsetting news should not be shared via email.



Doesn't allow to respond to varied reactions to the news by staff or students.



In person important. Avoidance of school is not advisable. School allows for a diversity of grief responses supervised by mental health practitioners and also allows for a return to normalcy by attending classes when students feel ready.



Consistency in script and/or announcement is important.



When remembering a person, remember a person holistically. Each of us is more than a coach, or a teacher. We are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Etc Different people remember him differently.



## SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS:

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- **Identify those that may struggle.** Have plans in place for support. Pay special attention to those staff or students that have had recent trauma or loss. .
- **Monitor the halls** as we do not want students grieving alone. Set up a gathering location with the Mental Health Team available.
- Ensure that **EAP** access is easy and available
- **Give staff the options of support** (accompaniment with the announcement or sub coverage or simply normalizing that it is OK to feel sad and emotional).



## SCENARIO #2

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Ally, a popular high school student, completed suicide at the age of 16. Her parents, devastated by their talented daughter's unexpected death ask to announce Ally's death by describing how they found her hanging in her closet and provided a '13 Reasons Why' lesson plan from the Center for Suicide Prevention on suicide and suicidal ideation for students. How would you respond?

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# SCENARIO 2

## THEMES

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Following the wishes of the family but only to a certain extent.

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Not announcing the cause of the death for it does not matter. Also, do not email sensitive information to people in the evening. A morning staff meeting is appropriate, in person, as you should never presume that a staff member will not be triggered by the news of the death of a student.

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Using only approved resources and developing a team to determine appropriate resources.

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# SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

Details of cause of death, speculation about reasons and sensational language should be avoided.

After a student suicide, school based mental health and admin teams should maintain an awareness of:

- Social media and rumors
- Watch for clusters of distress among students
- Continue mental health messaging over time
- Support staff who may also be grieving. Often staff and close friends will revisit and may need support..





# SCENARIO #3

Tragically, Hannah, a grade 4 student was killed in a motor vehicle accident while vacationing with family in California. The family community of Hannah's friends want to do something in remembrance. These parents have offered to purchase large plant pots that would be engraved with Hannah's first, last name and the years of her life as a memorial for their deceased friend. These would sit at the main entrance to the school. How would you respond to this request?

A close-up photograph of several large, green, curved leaves, possibly from a plant like a peace lily, filling the left side of the slide. The leaves are layered and curve downwards, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture and veins of the leaves.

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## SCENARIO 3 THEMES

- It is imperative that a child's death is not announced without the consent of a parent/guardian.
- Any announcement of death to a classroom should be accompanied by a notification letter to parents.
- Memorials should not extend over the course of multiple years. May cause trauma for students who, after a period, are ready to move on as part of their grief experience.
- Similar principle for student awards named after a deceased student and other potential memorials.

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# SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS



- **Respect for Family Wishes and Confidentiality**
- **Preparing a Developmentally Appropriate Response**
  - Prepare age-appropriate responses that acknowledge the absence while maintaining confidentiality.
- **Emotional Support for Students and Staff**
  - Some students or staff may still be grieving or concerned. Counsellors should ensure support is available for anyone struggling, even if details cannot be shared.
- **Continued Communication With the Family by principal.**

## SCENARIO #4

Stephanie, the star soccer player on your team, is stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend. The coach of the team calls a meeting for all of the players and declares that they will all spend the morning making cards for Stephanie's family and spending the morning in solidarity with one another as they grieve her loss.

How do you respond?



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# SCENARIO 4 CONSIDERATIONS



- We cannot force children to grieve in a particular manner or within a particular time frame.
- Grieving opportunities can be optional.
- It is appropriate to announce to all students and provide supports and ways to express grief (such as a liturgy, writing out cards, drawing pictures, spending quiet time in a sacred space).
- Not appropriate to dictate a particular way to grieve.

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# SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

## **Avoid Forcing Collective Grief Activities**

- While making cards together may seem supportive, mandatory group grieving can be problematic.

### Concerns:

- Students grieve in very different ways.
- Some may feel pressured to show emotion publicly.
- Others may want privacy or normal routines.
- A large emotional group setting can sometimes intensify distress or emotional contagion.
- Students that are close to the student that are not on the team may feel left out.

### **The counselling team may later consider:**

- Educational sessions on healthy relationships.
- Information about support services for abuse.



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## SCENARIO #5 – 10:15 AM ON ANY GIVEN SCHOOL DAY

**Context:** Three schools within the same district experience unrelated but serious critical incidents at the same time, placing pressure on leadership, emergency services, and district-level response systems.





## CRITICAL INCIDENT 1: STUDENT MEDICAL EMERGENCY IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- A Grade 5 student collapses during a physical education class.
- The student is unresponsive and not breathing normally.
- The class has witnessed the event.
- A student ran to the office to get assistance.
- Staff initiate CPR and use an AED while calling emergency services.
- Other students are distressed and require supervision and reassurance.
- The incident raises immediate safeguarding, communication, and post-incident support needs.
- The student is reported to be in stable condition in hospital.

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## CRITICAL INCIDENT 2: INTRUDER ON SCHOOL GROUNDS IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN THE SAME SCHOOL DISTRICT

- A parent with a history of aggressive behavior enters the school grounds without permission.
- The individual is shouting and attempting to access classrooms.
- The school initiates a lockdown procedure.
- Police are contacted, and staff must keep children calm while securing rooms.
- Parents begin contacting the school after hearing partial information on social media.



## CRITICAL INCIDENT 3: HUNTING ACCIDENT



- A student in grade 2 was accidentally shot by their sibling when on a hunting trip with their family.
- Both students attend schools in the same school district.
- The parents are going through a difficult divorce.
- Students were with their dad this particular weekend.
- There are no charges being laid. This was deemed an accident.
- Student is in the Children's hospital in critical condition.
- Students do not know what has happened. The family is newer to the area and not connected.
- This is in a rural school.
- News of this accident was brought to the principal from a community member confidentially.



# SCENARIO 5 CONSIDERATIONS

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1. Example of why having clear delineated roles organized in advance.
2. Having a large team that are able to mobilize.
3. Senior leaders, trustees and local authorities- how to work with local authorities. In this case, it is RCMP and Calgary Police.
4. Delegation and communication protocols are essential.
5. Staff wellbeing and post-incident support must be considered across all schools involved.

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# SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

- **Have a lead School Counsellor** that is directing the different Counselling teams responding to each school.
- Ensure that the mental health lead has **trained a CIRT response counselling team** so that they understand the flow and expectations when supporting.
- **Triage** is important.



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SUMMARY



# Common Emotional Responses

- Sadness, anger, guilt.
- Shock, denial, numbness.
- Anxiety or fear.
- Relief (especially after prolonged suffering of a loved one).
- Loneliness or isolation.
- Withdraw, excessive talking, crying, or appear unaffected.



## Tips for Conversations with Students



- Use clear, accurate language about death.
- Be honest; share approved facts only.
- Create a warm, trusting environment.
- Allow students to express grief in their own way.
- Listen, empathize, and normalize feelings.
- Maintain routine while offering flexibility.
- Identify students needing additional support and refer to counselling.
- Be patient — grief takes time.



- Link death to guilt, punishment, or sin.
- Force participation in discussion.
- Lecture, moralize, or offer clichés.
- Avoid the topic due to personal discomfort.
- Say “I know how you feel” unless you truly do.
- Dismiss or judge grief responses.
- Force a completely “normal” day or remove all structure.
- Expect adult responses from students.

**HE ASKED THEM, "WHAT ARE YOU  
DISCUSSING SO INTENTLY AS YOU  
WALK ALONG?" THEY STOOD STILL,  
WITH SADNESS ON THEIR FACES.**

***- LUKE 24:17***



# THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

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1. A grief-informed reading of Luke 24:13–35: Two disciples walk away from Jerusalem in sorrow.
2. Jesus accompanies them.
3. He listens first and allows them to express their grief in the manner that was appropriate for them before offering perspective.



## KEY LESSONS FOR CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE

- Make space for grief
- Let people name their loss;’
- Offer perspective not solution.
- Ministry of presence Quiet spaces, check-ins, predictable routines.

# THINKING THROUGH THE LENS OF GIFTS

If you are involved in a Critical Incident Response, we encourage you to view it as a gift.

The gift of stepping into another person's story, if even for a brief period of time in accompaniment.

As found in the Road to Emmaus, that gift is best practiced through presence.

It is best practiced in compassionate listening.

It is best practiced in recognizing that you are always teaching and you sometimes even get to teach children about death and dying, a natural part of life.

It is best practiced through recognizing the gift you have in walking the broken-hearted home from one of the most memorable and possibly challenging days of school or work one may experience.

