CHAPTER

2

What Should I Do? How Can I Help?

A Protocol for Action

One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.

—*CARL JUNG,* THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY

It was 2005. Velada Chaires was new to Springfield Central High School, where she joined the staff as an adjustment counselor, bringing with her the knowledge that she had cultivated while earning her master of social work degree at Smith College and working in a jail system. She was settling into her office in the library, acclimating to the demands of working within the second largest school district in the state of Massachusetts (public, urban, with 90 percent of graduates headed for college [Springfield Public Schools 2017]) when she was met with crisis—forced to, as she said, "learn by fire."

The hallways at Central filled with boys who were "crying and hitting things," running out of classrooms as a wave washed over the building: a senior and star basketball player, we'll call him Jerome, had been shot and killed in a drive-by. His friends were stunned. His teachers were devastated. To Velada's recollection, police officials never caught the shooter.

"I quickly figured out that I needed help," Velada told me, recalling the incident.

> We had to call in community people to help us manage the boys, because they were angry. Everything about them was just angry. It was the first time I ever saw prayer in school—an entire community came in and prayed with the boys. And then [we] had to separate the groups. The basketball team was one group, and the cheerleaders were a different group. The kids who had him in class . . . the kids who thought they knew him and thought they should be affected. The contagion was crazy. When that kind of stuff happens, it can be so unmanageable, and . . . it fell on me. There were just so many layers.

Faced with acute grief on a large scale—a communal "contagion"—Velada spoke with her supervisor and school administrators to galvanize the creation of a crisis response team that continues to operate today. Because she recognized resistance and reticence among students when school staff members sought to support them, she envisioned this external team as a cohort of "people who could talk to [the boys] and people [whom] they

felt comfortable talking to"—therapists, trained responders, and community mentors with whom the student body could identify.

I sat with Velada in Springfield, at a sunny Starbucks picnic table, on her first day of the 2019–20 school year, fourteen years after this tragedy occurred. "It was too big," she told me over the whir of interstate traffic.

> It took over the building. No work got done for four days. . . . I had to start learning how to figure out which kids really needed more [support], which kids just needed to get through, which kids were the 'hanger-oners', who had parents that could help them. Kids were coming to school; they weren't staying home. They were coming in just to cry.
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> That was the first big introduction to crisis work for me. I used to work in the jail, and coming from the jail system to that, it was a very different beast, because the jail is very controlled. School is not—it's fluid. You had to improvise all the time. And there was also a safety issue, because there were kids who knew him, and you didn't know if those kids were going to be safe in the street. It was hard to figure out, because it wasn't something that I knew about.

Here Be Dragons: Tools for Uncharted Territory

Loss may slip into the life of a student or schooling community quietly. Other times, as at Velada's school, grief disrupts as a lightning bolt to the building. In both instances, emotion can muddy our thinking, the size and scope of loss rendering action elusive or unclear. As ancient topographers noted uncharted territory with the infamous phrase, "Here Be Dragons," so can grief work feel foreign.

I resist condensing grief support into steps or tutorials, lest that framework reduce the complexity of the work to an inappropriately simplistic (or misleadingly standardized) form. However, when the presence of loss at school feels just too big, and teachers' decisions in the wake of it could create or negate a safe space, there is calm to be found in the certitude of a checklist or procedure to turn to for guidance. Science writer Atul Gawande, who writes elegantly about

mortality and medicine, describes good checklists as "practical," adding: "They do not try to spell out everything. . . . Instead, they provide reminders of only the most critical and important steps—the ones that even the highly skilled professional using them could miss" (2010, 120). This chapter offers distilled checklists to follow in the midst of loss experiences that impact individual students as well as those that challenge school systems at large. Consider them your gentle reminders. Your critical and important steps. Your starting place.

When Loss Impacts a Student

During my first semester studying education in college, I completed a multicultural education practicum in a local fourth-grade classroom, where I spent most of my time poring over literacy worksheets with a struggling but tenacious reader. We sharpened our pencils together and stuck with the tricky task of sentence construction, celebrating our progress along the way. This was a boy who was beloved by his classmates. His humor was ever present, his giggle contagious. But during our time together, he showed me a serious side. He voiced doubt in himself and his work. He dropped his pencil midsentence, saying, "I don't know," and looked to me for answers. I could see that, beneath this student's jokes, there was an unsure but hopeful reader, and I could not imagine a better pairing, for I was an unsure but hopeful educator. We helped each other, in this way—he teaching me how to teach, I teaching him how to trust himself.

Immersed as I was in these tutoring sessions, I felt my attention being tugged by one corner of the classroom that held an empty chair—blue, with tennis balls on its feet. A student, I'll call her Anna, was usually seated there, smiling behind black, thick-rimmed glasses. Lately, however, she was in school less frequently than before, and her absence changed the feel of the room.

As I entered the classroom one morning, Anna's teacher pulled me aside to tell me that Anna's mother had died from a terminal illness. The loss was expected but devastating.

Soon, Anna returned to school for half days, then full days, with the agreement that she could go home if she needed to. She had a younger brother in kindergarten, who clung to her legs when he saw her in the hallway, begging her not to leave—at times on the verge of tears.

My heart broke for Anna as I watched her care for and comfort her sibling in the wing of the school—and as I watched her father pick her up around noon, slinging her peace-sign backpack over his shoulder, his son perched on his hip. The image in my mind of the three of them, engaged in quotidian routine just weeks after their mother's and wife's death, serves for me as a humbling reminder of the ways in which insular loss—impacting a student or family—reverberates throughout a schooling community, the reciprocal relationship between students' and teachers' lives rendering an altered milieu.

Over the course of the term, Anna's relationship with her teacher blossomed. The two had an intimate bond that made me smile as I watched from the side. But I'm sure that it took time to get to that space. Relationships are not often built in one day; trust and rapport are strata of interactions and experiences, built layer-by-layer over time.

Knowing that I, too, experienced the death of a parent during my time as a student, Anna's teacher approached me with an idea. She had a book comprising chapters written by bereaved children and teens and wondered if I might give it a read to see if I thought it would prove helpful for Anna.

I welcomed the opportunity and admired this teacher's sincerity. She was determined to create a classroom space in which Anna felt validated and welcomed. She wanted to be a person to whom Anna could turn, and she had the forethought to be intentional about her relational approach. Leafing through the pages of this text in my dorm room one weekend, however, I happened upon chapters in which children divulged their deepest fears—how they worried about their parents remarrying or moving, how they were surprised to love new stepmothers and stepfathers.

Returning to Anna's classroom on Monday, I shared my concern with her teacher. Some of the stories were lovely and may very well aid Anna by making her feel less alone; however, I worried that other narratives may incite fears in her, especially at this early stage of her grieving process. What if she hadn't yet thought about the possibility of her father remarrying? What if the thought caused her deep anxiety?

Anna's teacher let out a gasp when I said this. "Of course!" she exclaimed, wide-eyed. "How come I didn't think of that?!"

Later in this book, we will talk about moments of repair—what Anna's teacher could have done, for instance, had she gifted this text to Anna and later realized its potential pitfalls. But for now, this memory seems a relevant example of the ways in which wonderful intentions and a willingness to directly address students' grief experiences are not foolproof precursors to dodging the creaky boards in the bridge of student support. When loss impacts a student or family, the steps in Figure 2–1 (also available as Online Resource 2–1) offer actionable guidance throughout the progression of grief; "they do not try to spell out everything," to Gawande's point (2010, 120), but are instead porous suggestions—"fluid," as Velada would say. The possibility of alteration and rearrangement, as well as room for repair, is always at your fingertips.

Check in with yourself. Choose the space from which you respond to a student's loss.

Many of us react to grief from a place of fear, anger, denial, or judgment, but we often do so passively or because our prior life experiences have conditioned us to do so. We can instead elect to react from a place of presence, centeredness, and care, even if those around us are struggling to do so, but we first must check in with our feelings and reactions and consider the why behind them. What do you notice about your own response to grief and loss? What has led you to have that reaction? As you process your own positioning, return to the intentions you set at the start of this book, and keep them in mind as you initiate contact with a grieving student in your classroom.

Map out a personal-care plan.

Supporting grieving students is challenging work, especially when their grief can raise thoughts and feelings about our own fears, losses, and traumas. Using a personal-care permission slip (see Chapter 5) as a guide, consider these questions: Whom in your circle of family, friends, and colleagues can you turn to for support and conversation? Who knows how best to listen to you? Are there

Grief Checklist: Student-Centric Loss

- ☐ Check in with yourself. Choose the space from which you respond to a student's loss.
- ☐ Map out a personal-care plan.
- ☐ Communicate with the impacted student.
- ☐ Collaborate with the student, as well as family members if appropriate, to address classroom accommodations.
- ☐ Prioritize the student's privacy and preferences.
- ☐ Notice how students and colleagues communicate about loss.
- ☐ Regulate routine in the classroom.
- ☐ Cull curricula; create teaching and trigger plans.
- ☐ Call upon and collaborate with specialists and resources.
- ☐ Follow up with the grieving student and maintain open communication across time.

Figure 2–1 Grief Checklist: Student-Centric Loss

professionals whom you feel comfortable turning to? Secondly, make a list of activities that help you destress and reregulate (e.g., running, cooking, yoga). Set parameters around your work life to afford distance and space so that you can maintain your own well-being in the face of grief work. Doing this from the outset lays a foundation for success in supporting grieving students.

Communicate with the impacted student.

Using the CODE framework addressed in Chapter 4, open a conversation with the impacted student. Express authentic concern, and use open-ended questions that encourage students to tell you about their lived experience to the extent that feels comfortable to them. Don't force disclosure, but do ask students how you can best support them, and establish a plan together regarding any classroom needs. In this initial conversation, position yourself as a member on this student's team, and ask them about their wishes: Do they want other students and teachers to know about the loss? If so, would they like to share the news themselves, or would they prefer that you share the news with specified individuals? Your directives will often become clear from direct communications with the impacted student.

Collaborate with the student, as well as family members if appropriate, to address classroom accommodations.

Grieving students may need an adjusted workload, with a gradual ascension or reintegration into classroom life. They may also benefit from more frequent brain breaks throughout the day; the opportunity to connect with the school counselor or a trusted teacher or friend; or the option to call home during the days following a loss. Work together with the student to put a plan in place for how you can best support what they're going through while also maintaining structure, routine, and the healthy expectations that we know to be helpful during times of stress.

Prioritize the student's privacy and preferences.

It's important to respect students' and families' privacy and preferences when learning about, and potentially speaking with others about, their loss. Because trust and safety are foundational in the creation of a grief-responsive environment, communicate directly

with the affected student first, as well as their family member(s) if appropriate, before sharing their loss story with colleagues and administrators.

Depending on the circumstance, it may feel appropriate to apprise others of a student's story—the school counselor, for example, or a colleague who is also interacting with the student, especially if concern arises regarding the student's well-being. Be mindful that you pay heed to students' wishes whenever possible; for example, invite them to share their story with others in their own words. The urge to share the story of a student's loss may come from a place of caring, but it will be counterproductive if a student arrives at school to discover you've spread their story without permission. Turn to support staff for suggestions about how best to navigate loss in your professional role, but only disclose specific details about a student's story when absolutely essential (or when withholding information would violate your duties as a mandated reporter).

Notice how students and colleagues communicate about loss.

Take note of the grief climate in which you find yourself working. When a loss impacts your learning environment, how do those around you respond? Do others seem open to discussing loss; make caustic jokes and judgmental comparisons; or perhaps go on with business as usual without addressing the issue at all? Know that you don't need to change others' reactions, but pay attention to the tendencies you witness and stay aware of how others' reactions influence your own approach and attitude toward grief work. Chances are, grieving students will pick up on the attitudes of others, so scanning your professional environment in this way will allow you to glean insight into the messages and energy your students may be internalizing, which can in turn inform your intentional response.

Regulate routine in the classroom.

Reflect upon how you already structure routine in your classroom—the expectations, activities, or processes that stay the same each day, week, or month. Next, consider how you can further support

consistency and dependability in grieving students' lives: How can you offer them a sense of control in the classroom—for example, through activities that afford them choice and agency—to offset the turmoil and upheaval of loss? How might you institute regular check-ins with them, creating a sense of predictability around social-emotional support?

Cull curricula; create teaching and trigger plans (Coalition to Support Grieving Students n.d.).

Scan your syllabus for curricular material that may raise challenging feelings for students who are going through grief. Check in with those students about their thoughts, feelings, and comfort levels regarding this proposed material. Offer alternative texts or topics of study to differentiate instruction, and confer with them in a calm moment to put together a plan for times when hard feelings might arise in response to curricular content: stake out a space where they can go, for example, if they feel activated; identify a person they can talk to; and name an activity they can do when feeling sad, scared, or dysregulated. To guide this conversation, you can use the personal-care permission slip provided in Chapter 5.

Know that reading and writing about loss can sometimes facilitate healing, and it's impossible to avoid challenging topics in academic content. The goal here is not to avoid reality so much as to scaffold curricular engagement by empowering students to take a challenge-by-choice approach.

Call upon and collaborate with specialists and resources.

Identify support resources available to you in and outside of your school system. At the micro level, do you have access to a school psychologist, nurse, counselor, or administrator? In your local community, can you connect with grief counselors, grief support groups or organizations, social workers, psychologists, therapists, or professional development groups? In the broader community, what resources can you consult (e.g., professional organizations, helplines, websites, books, journals, webinars)? List three resources you can turn to.

Follow up with the grieving student and maintain open communication across time.

We know that grief does not have a set end point, and students may struggle with a loss long after they let on anything is wrong. For that reason, keep your communication with a grieving student open; check in with them periodically, and consider how you might provide ongoing mentoring or support, even if they don't make disclosures to you about their grief. Know that consistency and connection are great antidotes to adversity, and your relationship with a grieving student can be a buffer that supports their well-being.

When Loss Impacts a School

Glenn Manning, a prior high school English teacher who is now the senior program coordinator at Making Caring Common, a social-emotional learning initiative sponsored by Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, spoke to me about his experiences with teaching in a district that was going through communal loss. "The district in which I was teaching unfortunately suffered a number of student suicides—several seniors [and] one student very, very tragically in fifth grade," he shared.

> The year really shook the community, and that was a devastating time for everyone. It really didn't matter if the teachers knew those students or their families. It impacted everybody—obviously differently, but there was a palpable sense of loss and it was really scary for a lot of our students, and a lot of people who felt chiefly responsible for their well-being and their safety. It really impacted me on a personal level.

Glenn's background in social-emotional learning afforded him unique insight into the challenges and potentials of scaffolding grief work with students. He noted that a primary focus of that work was attending to "caring relationships" between students, faculty, and staff. The term reminded me of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where—on Valentine's Day in 2018—an active shooter took the lives of seventeen people and traumatized

countless others. It sickens and sobers me when reading articles recapping this tragedy, imagining the challenges that surviving community members continue to face because of this senseless act. Here, too, caring relationships took priority and fueled action toward change. To return to dance teacher Laurel Boyd's words, the people facing these crises sought not to "lose the dancer for the dance," banding together—as in Velada's school—to support young people, as well as each other, as they sat with the incomprehensible.

There is much similarity, but also some difference, between loss protocols for grief that impacts a student and grief that affects a wider school community. When you take a look at Figure 2–2 (also available as Online Resource 2–2), you'll notice many familiar suggestions as well as greater emphases on certain aspects (memorialization, individualization) that gain heightened importance when dealing with loss on a larger scale and tending to caring relationships amid crisis.

Check in with yourself. Choose the space from which you respond to the loss.

As noted in the previous section, many of us react to grief from a place of fear, anger, denial, or judgment, but we often do so passively or because we've been conditioned to do so. We can instead elect to react from a place of presence, centeredness, and care, even if those around us are struggling to do so, but making such a choice can feel extra challenging when loss impacts a school, because we are most likely grieving alongside our students. Check in with yourself regularly: What do you notice about your own response to grief and loss? What has led you to have that reaction? Are you receiving the support you need? As you process your own positioning, return to the intentions you set at the start of this book, and keep them in mind as you initiate contact with grieving students in your classroom. Share your intentions with colleagues and students if you feel inclined; doing so will create space for communication about your shared loss.

Map out a personal-care plan.

Supporting grieving students is challenging work, especially when you may also be grieving. Using a personal-care permission slip (Chapter 5) as a guide, consider these questions: Whom in your circle of family, friends, and colleagues can you turn to for support and conversation? Who knows how best to listen to you? Are there professionals whom you feel comfortable turning to? Secondly, make a list of activities that help you destress and reregulate (e.g., running, cooking, yoga). Set parameters around your work life to afford distance and space so that you can maintain your own well-being in the face of grief work.

Communicate with administrators and crisis response professionals (as applicable) about any schoolwide action plan and how you can implement it in your classroom.

When loss impacts a school, there is often a protocol imposed upon teachers by administrators or outside specialists who are called in to offer their advice. Pay attention to any directives given, and consider how you can enact schoolwide protocols while also tailoring your supportive approach to meet what you know to be the needs of your students.

Connect with colleagues. Notice how others react to and talk about the event.

Take note of the grief climate in which you find yourself working, especially when your colleagues may also be grieving. Do others seem open to discussing the loss and their approach to supporting students? Do they make caustic jokes and judgmental comparisons or perhaps go on with business as usual and neglect to address the issue at all? Are they overly positive, insisting on putting an optimistic spin on the tragedy that took place? Know that you don't need to change others' reactions, but pay attention to the tendencies you witness and stay aware of how others' reactions influence your own approach and attitude toward grief work. Chances are, grieving students will pick up on the attitudes of others, so scanning your professional environment in this way will allow you to glean insight into the messages and energy they may be internalizing, which can in turn inform your intentional response.

Grief Checklist: School-Centric Loss

- ☐ Check in with yourself. Choose the space from which you respond to the loss.
- ☐ Map out a personal-care plan.
- ☐ Communicate with administrators and crisis response professionals (as applicable) about any schoolwide action plan and how you can implement it in your classroom.
- ☐ Connect with colleagues. Notice how others react to and talk about the event.
- ☐ Speak with students and family members about the event and your response.
- ☐ Adjust workload as appropriate.
- ☐ Identify and watch out for students for whom loss or trauma may prove especially challenging.
- ☐ Make space for multimodal communication or expression about the event within your classroom and caring relationships.
- ☐ Regulate routine in your classroom to the extent that is possible. Support a sense of safety at school.
- ☐ Consider collective memorialization efforts (schoolwide, classwide) to execute with your students.
- ☐ Cull curricular content; create a grief trigger plan.
- ☐ Call upon and collaborate with specialists and resources.
- ☐ Continue the conversation.

Figure 2–2: Grief Checklist: School-Centric Loss

Speak with students and family members about the event and your response.

Be transparent with students and their family members about the school-based loss experience and your response to it in the classroom. You might talk about any schoolwide approaches that you and your colleagues have undertaken while emphasizing your individual efforts to create safety, connection, and an environment supportive of emotional regulation in your learning space. Welcome their questions and maintain a reciprocal dialogue in the aftermath of the loss.

Adjust workload as appropriate.

Students who are grieving deserve accommodations, and they also often benefit from routine, structure, and healthy expectations. Collaborate with colleagues to integrate any schoolwide accommodations in your classroom; if none exist, create an approach that works for you and your students, knowing that they will most likely benefit from a flexible workload and gradual ascension or reintegration into the classroom in the period following a loss. Because some grieving students may throw themselves into work for distraction, you should also consider how best to support balance in the lives of your students.

Identify and watch out for students for whom loss or trauma may prove especially challenging.

Students who have a history of trauma or grief may prove especially vulnerable to, or have an attenuated ability to cope with, loss. Think about the composition of your classroom. Do you have students who you know have endured loss? How about homelessness, foster care, or a parent who struggles with addiction? Are there children in your room who have lived through a natural disaster or who have a parent overseas in the military? Are there students who have experienced a house fire? Students who struggle to self-regulate? Keep a careful eye on these students. Think about their unique needs and what you already know about the learning and communication styles that click for them. Alter your support strategies according to your history with these students, realizing that the strength already required of them can make it more challenging for them to face loss at school.

Make space for multimodal communication or expression about the event within your classroom and caring relationships.

Talking about loss is challenging for all of us and may prove out of reach for some students. Be sure that, in your efforts to support grief work, students have opportunities to express themselves in a multitude of ways: writing, drawing, advocating, fundraising, creating, running, dancing, and meditating are all ways for students to find the space and awareness to work through tough times and their responses to them.

Regulate routine in your classroom to the extent that is possible. Support a sense of safety at school.

Reflect upon how you already structure routine in your classroom—the expectations, activities, or processes that stay the same each day, week, or month. Next, consider how you can further support consistency and dependability in grieving students' lives: How can you offer them a sense of control in the classroom—for example, through activities that afford them choice and agency—to offset the turmoil and upheaval of loss? Deaths that impact a schooling community may involve violence or severe illness, and they can incite fear in students of all ages. Jot down some interventions you might incorporate into your daily classroom routine to assuage students' anxieties, such as meditation, sharing circles, dedicated spaces or times to come together and speak about the event, or other community-building activities.

Consider collective memorialization efforts (schoolwide, classwide) to execute with your students.

In Chapter 7, we'll explore the importance of communal memorialization. Consider the nature of your and your students' relationship with the deceased and students' wishes and ideas about how to honor their legacy. What feels within reach for you to facilitate? How can your classroom community heal and grow together through memorialization efforts?

Cull curricular content; create a grief trigger plan (Coalition to Support Grieving Students n.d.).

Scanning your syllabus for curricular material that may raise challenging feelings for students who are going through grief is even more important when loss impacts a school. Check in with students regarding their thoughts, feelings, and comfort levels regarding proposed material, and keep in mind any outside guidance you receive from administrators or support professionals regarding challenging content.

Consider offering alternative texts or topics of study to differentiate instruction for students, and confer with them in a calm moment to put together a plan for times when hard feelings might arise: stake out a space where they can go, for example, if they feel activated; identify a person they can talk to; and name an activity they can do when feeling sad, scared, or dysregulated. To guide this conversation, you can use the personal-care permission slip provided in Chapter 5.

Know that reading and writing about loss can sometimes facilitate healing, and it's impossible to avoid challenging topics in academic content. The goal here is not to avoid reality so much as to scaffold curricular engagement by empowering students to take a challenge-by-choice approach.

Call upon and collaborate with specialists and resources.

Identify support resources available to you in and outside of your school system. At the micro level, do you have access to a school psychologist, nurse, counselor, or administrator? In your local community, can you connect with grief counselors, grief support groups or organizations, social workers, psychologists, therapists, or professional development communities? In the broader community, what resources can you consult (e.g., professional organizations, helplines, websites, books, journals, webinars)? List three resources you can turn to.

Continue the conversation.

Grief that impacts a school community can disrupt the learning environment beyond one academic year. Keep your communication with grieving students and colleagues open; check in with them

periodically, and consider how you might provide and seek ongoing support. Know that consistency and connection are great antidotes to adversity, and your relationship with grieving students and colleagues can be a buffer that supports well-being. Yet you, too, need continued connection and support and should not feel shy about seeking out resources even after the visible aftermath of a loss concludes.

Throughout this book, we will explore the specifics of many of these checkpoints, from communicating with students and parents while sustaining ongoing mentoring (Chapter 4) to approaching mortality and content warnings in curricula (Chapter 5). I encourage you to return to these checklists throughout your reading experience, carrying with you new knowledge, experiences, and questions.

The Importance of Energy over Directives

As helpful as it is to turn to instructions in times of vulnerability, following any strictures too closely can also breed anxiety or imply that there is a right and wrong way to approach loss, which often is not the case. Following loss, whether at the individual or communal level, focus on the feeling—rather than the procedure—with which you hope to structure students' schooling experiences. Students are likely to respond viscerally to a teacher exuding warmth and willingness, or fear and frustration, no matter the words that come out of that teacher's mouth. "Many students are especially sensitive to the emotional energy in a classroom," writes Jane Bluestein in *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*, "particularly that which is subtly broadcast by the teacher's emotional state. These students can sense tension, impatience and hostility, or enthusiasm, delight or calm in others, and may be particularly adept if they come from a background of trauma or abuse, where this hypervigilance is a practiced survival skill" (2001, 25).

Of course, such an emotional state is—to an extent—ineffable. It does not equate with the effeminate, Pollyanna nature that may come to mind but rather an authenticity and honesty in action and reaction that requires careful calibration. Children crave honesty. And students of all ages can read into our receptivity and sincerity. They

may even tend toward "a negativity bias," as Laurel mentioned during our interview, especially if they have experienced trauma, which alters brain structures implicated in negative self-perception (van der Kolk 2000; Slaninova and Stainerova 2015). Laurel explained,

> I think a lot of times for students, especially in the teenage years, there can be a negativity bias. It can feel for students a lot like it's us versus them, teachers versus students, a strangely adversarial relationship in some ways. I always have questions about the right way to approach. I've always felt pretty confident that if I at least let them know that I see they're going through something and that I care, I find that, more often than not, over time, they'll be able to share a little bit of it. But the key is to deliver that message consistently.

Part of "delivering that message consistently" means maintaining awareness of tacit communication—the messages that we send to students and colleagues through our body language, eye contact, and other nonverbal cues. In your interactions with grieving students, ask yourself: What message is my body language communicating to this student, and does that message align with my intent? Am I making eye contact with this young person? Are my nonverbal cues creating a calm environment supportive of their expression?

What we say to students will lose its impact if our actions and nonverbal communications misalign with our spoken messages. Creating a classroom environment that feels safe and secure in the context of grief, no matter the scale, begins with you, the educator, whose actions reverberate outward to students and colleagues in your community and beyond. This is an area where it's important to check in with yourself, too—if you find it challenging to create a calm environment through your nonverbal cues, it likely means that you have your own work to do regarding the topic, story, or situation at hand, and that is OK. When we come to this realization, we can adjust our approach to students by connecting them with a colleague or professional who is better equipped to tackle a certain topic, or by addressing student support from a different angle. Self-awareness allows us to recognize that the space we create with and for students impacts how they feel about themselves and their stories, and to calibrate our work accordingly.

Write and Reflect

What thoughts, questions, fears, and hopes come to mind when you think about teaching students who are grieving? What do you feel toward these students? What do you wonder? Honor your first thoughts without judgment.