

Supporting Autistic Students Experiencing Grief and Loss: Tip Sheet for Educators



WHAT TYPES OF LOSS MIGHT CAUSE AN AUTISTIC STUDENT TO EXPERIENCE GRIEF?

Unfortunately, experiencing loss and grief is a part of life, and at one point or another, everyone experiences some type of loss. It is important to recognize that there are different types of losses, and everyone reacts to loss differently. Loss of a favorite toy, the opportunity for a routine activity, moving to a new school, or losing a friend, loved one, or animal companion can all cause significant sadness and grief for students, including students on the autism spectrum.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO GRIEF AND LOSS

It is important to recognize that all students' responses to grief and loss can vary greatly. Some may respond with anger, others may cry, some may seek out social connection, whereas others may withdraw and prefer to be alone. Additionally, experiencing grief and loss can impact a student's social, emotional, and cognitive functioning, making it difficult for them to focus and attend to instruction, interact with others, and regulate their emotional and behavioral responses.

Autistic students may present with similar or different emotional and/or behavioral responses to grief and loss. For some autistic students, they might express their emotions differently than expected. For example, an autistic student might laugh when experiencing grief. It is important to recognize that just because an autistic student is responding differently than what may be expected, they are still experiencing grief and sadness.

Changes in student behavior immediately after a stressful life event or loss should be expected. However, if changes in student behavior persist several months after the event, you will want to refer the student to a school-based mental health provider for additional support.

Different emotional and behavioral responses
» Laughing or smiling instead of crying
Varied intensity of emotional and behavioral responses
» Having a flat affect and showing no change in emotions or behaviors
» Demonstrating significant emotional and/or behavioral responses, such as aggression or frequent crying

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS EXPERIENCING GRIEF AND LOSS

It is important to recognize that when an autistic student responds differently than expected in a situation, that difference in response is influenced by the characteristics of autism and the social communication and behavioral differences experienced by the student.

Here are some potential challenges that autistic students facing loss and grief may experience:
<p>Understanding the emotions or feelings of others impacted by the loss</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Asking questions or making comments at times that may not be socially appropriate » Asking a parent who has just gone through a divorce why they are crying
<p>Knowing and understanding “hidden” social rules around how to respond</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Not knowing how to behave at a wake or funeral » Voicing to family members or friends at a funeral, negative, yet true, memories or qualities of the person who has died
<p>Recognizing that a change in routine due to a loss is causing sadness, anger, and/or frustration for them and that it is normal to experience those feelings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Asking questions repeatedly about what happened to gain reassurance, especially when there is a change in routine or there are feelings of sadness, worry, and/or anger
<p>Experiencing confusion around specific aspects of the situation or loss</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Not being told developmentally appropriate information about the situation, thereby experiencing confusion and lack of understanding » Not understanding the permanency of death and thinking their loved one will eventually return

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC STUDENTS EXPERIENCING GRIEF AND LOSS

An introduction to social narratives for supporting autistic students experiencing grief and loss

Social narratives are visual stories which describe various social situations, expected social behaviors, and when these behaviors should be displayed. Social narratives can be effective with autistic individuals for addressing difficulties with interfering behavior, communication, social skills, academic readiness, adaptive skills, and attention (Wong et al., 2014).

TRIAD has developed the following Grief and Loss social narrative templates for educators and families to support autistic students experiencing the following situations:

- » death of a loved one,
- » school shooting,
- » natural disaster, and
- » parental divorce.

Before using these social narrative templates with your student(s), please review the next few sections that share some important tips for implementation. At the end of this resource, you will find some additional considerations and strategies for supporting autistic students experiencing various types of grief and loss.

Implementing Grief and Loss Social Narratives

For social narratives to be effective for autistic students, it is important that they are individualized, to the extent possible, for a student's specific situation. Please see the following guidelines for individualizing TRIAD's Grief and Loss social narrative templates.

- » Familiarize yourself with the steps for writing social narratives by downloading the tip sheet on how to write social narratives: <https://bit.ly/49doxZY>
- » Look through the social narrative template and using the guidelines for creating social narratives (see tip sheet link above), modify the language to fit the circumstances for your student. Be sure to look at the notes section below each slide for additional instructions when individualizing the social narrative.
Social narratives work best when they include more descriptive than directive statements (Two descriptive statements for every one directive statement). Descriptive statements share facts and feelings. Directive statements direct behavior or a student's responses to situations.
- » Be sure to gather appropriate information about the relevant details of the situation before attempting to individualize the social narrative.
- » If using pictures or visuals, be sure to include pictures that are representative for your student, both in terms of developmental level and specifics of the event the social narrative is describing.
- » Make sure the level of language used in the social narrative is appropriate for the student's language level.
- » Identify any background knowledge or information the student may need to know to support their understanding of the social narrative.

Logistics for implementing the social narratives

If implementing the social narratives at school, you may want to come up with a social narrative implementation plan that includes the student's family/caregivers and educational team. As you develop a plan for implementation, please consider the following:

Who will be involved with reading the social narrative to the student?

- » The educational team can determine who will be the most appropriate person to review the social narrative with the student. Consider someone the student has a positive relationship with and feels comfortable interacting with.

What materials will be needed?

- » You will need the completed social narrative, either printed out or have a computer to share it on.

When and how often will the social narrative be read?

- » This will depend on the student and what the educational team determines is most appropriate, with input from the student's family members/caregivers. It is important to remember that autistic students and students with diverse learning needs may take weeks or months to process a stressful life event or experience. In addition to reviewing the social narrative with the student, if appropriate, you could consider keeping the social narrative available for the student(s) to review on their own.

Where will the social narrative be reviewed?

- » Preferably, you will want to find a quiet place free from distractions to review the social narrative with the student.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESOURCES FOR WAYS TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC STUDENTS EXPERIENCING GRIEF AND LOSS

❑ Death of a Loved One

Whether a student loses a family member or a beloved pet, the death of a loved one can cause significant grief. In addition to using TRIAD's *Death of a Loved One* social narrative with autistic students, here are some other considerations and resources for supporting autistic students experiencing the death of a loved one:

Considerations and Resources for Supporting Autistic Students Experiencing the Death of a Loved One	
Elementary-Aged Considerations:	Middle/High School-Aged Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Stick to routines as often as possible, as routines provide consistency and predictability, especially during times of significant change. » With caregiver input, provide clear, concrete, and developmentally appropriate information about death. Using books and videos can be helpful to support understanding. » Try to make the concept of death as concrete as possible. Avoid euphemisms or phrases such as “going to sleep” or “passing away” to explain death or dying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Express sincere concern to the student. » Provide opportunities for the student to share about their loved one and express their feelings and thoughts in whatever way is most appropriate and comfortable for them. » Explain to the student that everyone experiences grief differently and that there is no wrong way to grieve, unless it causes harm to the student or others.

Additional resources for talking to autistic students about the death of a loved one	
How to Talk to Your Child with Special Needs About Death (Friendship Circle)	https://bit.ly/3uzVYXC
Understanding Death and Illness and What They Teach about Life (Catherine Faherty)	https://bit.ly/49fkJqW
Bereavement and Autism Spectrum Disorders (National Autistic Society)	https://bit.ly/48ffYMT
Finding Your Own Way to Grieve: A Creative Activity Workbook for Kids and Teens on the Autism Spectrum (Karla Helbert)	https://amzn.to/49ex9zx
Autism and Grief Project	www.autismandgrief.org

❑ School Shooting

Tragic events, such as school shootings, unfortunately occur, and students can be exposed to them directly or indirectly. Hearing about a school shooting, whether it has happened in your community or not, can cause increased anxiety and feelings of loss or grief for any student. In addition to using TRIAD's *Experiencing a School Shooting* social narrative with autistic students, below are some other considerations and resources for supporting autistic students who have experienced or heard about a school shooting.

Considerations and Resources for Supporting Autistic Students Who Have Experienced a School Shooting	
Elementary-Aged Considerations:	Middle/High School-Aged Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Talk about the event by offering simple facts that are developmentally appropriate and avoid sharing unnecessary details. » Acknowledge student fears and let students know they can share their feelings with you and ask you questions. » Reinforce ideas of safety and security. Share what your school is doing to increase safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Encourage students to ask questions about the event and answer those questions directly using developmentally appropriate language. » Correct any misconceptions or inaccurate information shared by students. » Be patient with yourself and your students. Recognize that the incident may impact your students' behavior, attention, and concentration in the classroom. Remind your students that if they have any concerns, they should share them with you.

Additional resources for talking to autistic students about a school shooting	
Helping Youth After Community Trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)	https://bit.ly/3SXC16f
Helping Children with Disabilities Cope with Disaster and Traumatic Events (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)	https://bit.ly/3uw5hb0
Helping a Child with Autism Deal with Disaster (Autism Speaks)	https://bit.ly/3UEvRsT
Restoring a Sense of Safety in the Aftermath of a Mass Shooting: Tips for Parents and Professionals (Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress)	https://bit.ly/49y0CEb

❑ Natural Disaster

Natural disasters can be unpredictable and range in impact depending on your location. Often these situations can be chaotic and call for immediate action. Experiencing a natural disaster can be distressing for autistic students who may dislike having no control over a situation that is, by nature, out of our control. In addition to using TRIAD's *Following a Natural Disaster* social narrative with autistic students, here are some other considerations and resources for supporting autistic students who have experienced a natural disaster.

Considerations and Resources for Supporting Autistic Students Experiencing a Natural Disaster	
Elementary-Aged Considerations:	Middle/High School-Aged Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Prepare the students ahead of time by explaining what natural disasters may commonly occur in your area and why they occur. Acknowledge that these events can feel scary even if they are natural. » Involve the student in creating a visual for steps to take during safety drills and practice the drill together. » Allow students to have access to objects (e.g., fidget toys, headphones, etc.) to help them remain calm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Be clear and concise with safety drill instructions. Make sure the students understand how to respond and ensure that these methods will make them as safe as possible. » Provide opportunities for the student to share about the impact a natural disaster had on them. Allow them to express their feelings and thoughts in whatever way is most appropriate and comfortable for them. » Discuss options for the student to volunteer in their community, such as cleanup or helping at shelters. This can help the student gain a sense of control.

Additional resources for talking to autistic students about natural disasters	
Natural Disaster Resources (Autism Speaks)	https://bit.ly/3SXRqDO
Person-Centered Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) Workbook	https://bit.ly/48fhnmd

□ Parental Divorce

Although there are situations in which both caregivers are still part of the student’s life, divorce can bring a new kind of loss—a loss of normalcy. The amount of change to a student’s routine will vary case by case, but it can still be difficult for autistic students to adjust to their new “normal.” In addition to using TRIAD’s *Dealing with Divorce* social narrative with autistic students, here are some other considerations and resources for supporting autistic students dealing with parental divorce:

Considerations and Resources for Supporting Autistic Students Dealing with Parental Divorce	
Elementary-Aged Considerations:	Middle/High School-Aged Considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Stick to routines as often as possible, as routines provide consistency and predictability especially during times of significant change. » Provide resources, such as picture books, that demonstrate multiple family dynamics (i.e., that show a variety of families besides the typical two-parent household). » Assure the student that this change does not impact the relationship they have with their parents. Even if it takes consistent reassurance, it is important for them to understand that they will always be loved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Do not speak negatively about the caregivers in front of the student. » Provide opportunities for the student to share information about their new situation if they are comfortable. Sometimes it helps to talk about big changes, such as having more living arrangements than before. » Allow your student time to adjust. Recognize that this may impact your students’ behavior, attention, and concentration in the classroom depending on the nature of the divorce.

Additional resources for talking to autistic students about divorce	
Telling Your Kids You’re Getting a Divorce (Pathfinders for Autism)	https://bit.ly/42AEd73
How to Help Your Autistic Child Cope with Their Parents’ Divorce (Stages Learning)	https://bit.ly/3wfbHHf
For Teens: Dealing with Divorce (Kids Health)	https://bit.ly/48hChSa
For Kids: Coping with Divorce (Kids Health)	https://bit.ly/3Sy8M8K
Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families (Laurene Krasny Brown & Marc Brown)	https://a.co/d/bNNbsBg

ADDITIONAL TRIAD RESOURCES

- Grief and Loss Overview Tip Sheet for Educators
- Grief and Loss Overview Tip Sheet for Caregivers
- Experiencing a School Shooting: Social Narrative Template
- Learning about a School Shooting: Social Narrative Template
- Following a Natural Disaster: Social Narrative Template
- Dealing with Divorce: Social Story Narrative Template
- Death of a Loved One: Social Story Narrative Template