

A Teenager Shares the Dos and Don'ts of Helping a Student Through Trauma

My sister died on Tuesday, March of 2016. I've experienced firsthand what a teacher should and shouldn't do to help a student through trauma.

[Chase Mielke](#) on February 9, 2017



This post was written by Avery Peters, an incredibly compassionate, hilarious and authentic 10th grader.

As a teacher, you see many kids. You look at them as normal. But no matter how closely you look at students, you never know what is going on in their lives because many students wear "masks" to avoid attention. That's exactly what I did after a trauma that changed my life.

A Tuesday in March of 2016. I am pulled out of class and told that I need to go home immediately. I pray that nothing too serious has happened. Walking into the house, I see my parents holding each other. My dad looks at me. "Your sister was in a car accident, and baby, she didn't make it."

She was only 18 years old when she ran a stop sign and collided with a delivery truck, then hit a nearby house in full force. My body went limp as I heard the news. I fell to my knees crying.

Days before returning to school, I thought about what seeing everyone was going to be like for me. I knew I had to pretend things were normal.

You may not know a student going through the exact situation as I did, but perhaps you know of a student who is suffering through some sort of affliction or hardship, whether that be through a parent's divorce, a death, an illness, etc. My experience has helped me learn what teachers can do and what they shouldn't do to help a student who has experienced trauma.

What Helped Me

1. DO be flexible.

A month after my sister passed away, my mind was nothing but a distraction from my school work. I was dazed by the misery from my sister's fatality. I couldn't keep my mind from wandering. My teachers did an excellent job of giving me the support I needed to keep me up-to-date with the rest of the class.

2. DO be available.

Having a teacher being available in my time of need made my journey easier on me as a student. Making free time after school for extra help if your student needs it can lift so much weight off of their already heavy

shoulders.

What Didn't Help Me

1. DON'T ignore the issue.

One teacher I opened up with expressed the thought I'm sure most people have: If they did not bring up the tragedy, I would not be thinking about it. That is the furthest thing from the truth. I would strongly recommend that teachers do not ignore the hardship that your student is going through. Acknowledge their pain and appreciate how strong they are because it takes all the power and control students have to not break down when they feel alone following a traumatic event.

Acknowledging a student does not mean talking publicly or in front of the class. Instead, it can look like keeping a student before or after class to hear about their feelings or even sending a little sign of recognition to that student whose world has just fallen apart. Recognition can be highlighting who someone is in a positive manner, encouraging a sense of hope or connecting with that student one-on-one.

2. DON'T shut down dialogue.

You cannot know a child is wearing a mask until you speak with them. Without an invitation to talk, students are left to process emotions alone, which often looks like ruminating or thinking negatively. Ways to open dialogue:

- Once every week or so, give your students a chance to write a short paragraph about how they are doing.
- If you are noticing a change in emotions or behavior during class, pull them aside and discuss these newfound emotions.
- Ask for a subtle hand signal like a thumb up/down or have a student show on a scale of 1 to 5 how he or she is feeling that day.

What Else Teachers Can Do

1. DO understand survivor guilt.

An educator should understand that during a traumatic event like death, a surviving child can often feel guilty. I've made false assumptions about my sister's death that lead to a very destructive guilt inside of me. I thought that in some way her death was my fault because I did not stop her from leaving the house that morning. I felt remorse for the way our last conversations went—how I could have been nicer to her or told her that I loved her more.

It is common for children going through grief to experience survivor guilt that can be related to a sense of worthlessness. Just being able to understand what is potentially going through your student's head and then being able to minimize these kinds of amplified ideas will help ease their pain. Explain to your student that they are not at fault for their trauma. Explain what survivor guilt is and allow them to reveal their deep feelings. Help them process and analyze their own thought patterns.

2. DO build a mentor relationship.

Students who have lost their parent may have lost the person who drives them to school every day or tucks them in bed. They have lost a critical mentor. A teacher may play a great part as a new positive role model.

Losing a sibling makes this loss of a mentor even more challenging. That student not only has to deal with their own grief but the grief that their parents are feeling. This can impact their lives in so many ways, one of which is just watching their parents suffer. In addressing their own grief, parents can emotionally check out, which can feel like neglecting the surviving child who is also grieving but who still needs a stable parent. This is where a teacher can yet again be fit to be a role model for that student to

look up to.

Being a mentor to a student can include:

- Respecting a student's right to confidentiality.
- Careful listening and providing opportunities to talk.
- Teaching how to communicate emotions properly.
- Keeping in touch with the student even beyond his or her time in your class.
- Encouraging the student to be active with positive hobbies or interests.

Today, almost one year after my sister's death, I still feel the emotions deepening. All of this is still so new to me; I know that I am taking baby steps through a long life without her. During school as time goes by, I am beginning to feel more like myself as opposed to hiding behind my mask. My teachers have helped me as much as they know how in my time of need. Being able to feel the comfort and sympathy from someone that I look up to is one of the most encouraging things I have ever felt.

While you cannot change the trauma your student experienced, you can help them heal. Work your way toward meeting and mentoring the student who has been hidden under his or her mask.