



Teachers Guide: Grief Grades 6-12 Lesson

“Understanding Different Views on Death”

Teaching End-of-Life Issues in the Classroom

For many people death can be a difficult topic to discuss. The challenge for educators is to provide children with a variety of strategies that allow them to discuss openly the issues surrounding death and dying. To do so effectively requires sensitivity, courage, and the creation of a classroom climate where children feel comfortable discussing their feelings. These lessons were created to provide teachers with multiple entry points for dealing with children's experiences of death, dying and the afterlife. The following lessons will be useful in helping children deal with the death or illness of a family member, friend, or pet, as well as media-reported deaths, including those of celebrities and victims of mass tragedies. In this guide you'll also find some tips and strategies for using *With Eyes Open*--the program and its Web site--in your classroom. Teachers may tape *With Eyes Open* and use the videotape for educational purposes for up to ten days after the broadcast.

To purchase the tape, call Films for the Humanities & Sciences at 1-800-257-5126 or visit: www.films.com.

Introduction

The purpose of this lesson is to develop an understanding of the variety of ways in which people deal with death, how both children and teenagers come to understand death, how death is portrayed in the media and popular culture, and the importance of expressing emotions surrounding death and dying. In this lesson the students will research various grassroots movements that have arisen around death and dying, and write a letter to a person or a pet that has died.

Materials:

- Internet Access. (You may want to use the computer lab for this assignment. Another option is to have students who have Internet access at home do their work at home. If you have a projection facility, you can do the research as a class.)
- Paper
- Writing Utensils

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Discuss different aspects of death and dying.
2. Examine their values surrounding death.
3. Synthesize and compare information from different research sources.
4. Create and enact small group presentations based on what they have learned.
5. Collect samples of the ways death is portrayed in the media and popular culture.
6. Write a letter concerning the emotions that surround death and dying.

Developing Background

1. Read aloud the following statement from the *With Eyes Open* moderator:

"I know that in this country we tend to look on death as just a medical event. But it's much more than that, isn't it? It's about our relationships to ourselves and each other and to whatever image of ultimate kindness we hold."

-Frank Ostaseski

2. Brainstorm possible meanings. Discuss the following questions:
 - How do we talk about death in our culture?
 - How do you think people feel about discussing death?
 - What do you think the speaker in the above quote means by an "image of ultimate kindness?"
 - What is your idea of "an image of ultimate kindness?"
 - Do you feel comfortable talking about death and dying? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions

The following activities are designed to explore the different ways we use words to describe emotions, how we learn and talk about death, and how death is represented in popular media.

1. Write the following statement on the board and brainstorm possible meanings:
Death is an inevitable part of life.
2. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to discuss their first experiences with death. How did they learn about it? What did their parents teach them?
3. Many people don't learn about death through their parents. Instead they learn from television (news), movies, cartoons, music, and other elements of popular culture.
4. Ask each group to bring in examples of how death is represented in popular media. You may find helpful the list of movies, books, and websites in the *With Eyes Open* Youth Resources area (http://dipsy.pbs.org/witheyeyesopen/resources_youth.html).
5. Ask students to think of examples of movies they have seen in which one of the main characters dies. The following are some suggested movie titles: *Life Is Beautiful*, *Ordinary People*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Beaches*, and *Corrina, Corrina*. Discuss how death and dying is portrayed in these movies.
6. Compare the differences and similarities of the movies you discussed.
7. Lead a class discussion on how death is depicted in popular culture.
 - Are these different portrayals useful, helpful, misleading or unclear?
 - How does the media influence our understandings?
 - Do they portray a diverse portrait of how society deals with death and dying?
8. Discuss the following euphemisms that people use when they talk about death.
Passed away Joined their ancestors

Met his maker
Lost

Gone to sleep
Won't be with us

Ask the students why they think these are used. Discuss how they could be both confusing and problematic.

9. Write the following quote on the board.

"Give sorrow words;
the grief that does not speak
whispers the o'er-fraught heart
and bids it break."

- Shakespeare, Macbeth (iv,iii)

10. Discuss the quote with the class. Ask the students the following questions:

- Generate a list of words that deal with people's emotions surrounding death. What are some words to describe sorrow?
- What do you think Shakespeare was trying to say? Do you agree?
- Can you think of examples from your own life to support your opinion?
- Why did Shakespeare express the sentiment that unspoken grief will break the heart?
- What are some things that people can do to prevent this from happening?

Activity One

Duration: 90 minutes

In this lesson students will discuss and explore various responses to death.

1. Divide students into small research groups. Each group will visit a different website.

Group One: Mothers Against Drunk Driving

<http://www.madd.org/aboutmadd/default.shtml>

Group Two: Robert Sanders: Automobile Air Bags

<http://detnews.com/2000/autos/0003/29/a01-26337.htm>

Group Three: Carolyn McCarthy: Gun Control Legislation

http://www.nydailynews.com/archive/96_11/110696/news/4614.htm

Group Four: Adam Walsh & Missing Children

<http://www.missingkids.com>

2. Ask each group to answer the following questions based on their research. The results should be shared with the whole class.

- What emotions motivated the people you researched?
- People express grief and loss in different ways, what do you think of the way they responded to their loss?
- How did they use these emotions to further their cause?
- Did their emotions help them deal with their loss? In what ways?
- Do you think their work in these causes helps them move on with their lives, or prevents it?
- What are the benefits of their actions?

3. Read the following quote from KQED's *With Eyes Open* to the class:

"You wake up to life when someone dies."

Discuss the speaker's meaning. Ask the students to think about how this quote applies to the people they researched in this activity.

Activity Two

Duration: 60 minutes (This time may vary depending on how much of the work is completed outside of the classroom.)

1. Visit the Letter Writing Project on the following website:

http://www.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/bostonarts/2000/highlights_letters.html

Lee Mingwei created the Letter Writing Project after his grandmother died. The project began with Lee Mingwei writing letters to her to say the things that he had wanted to tell his grandmother before she died, but hadn't.

(Students may wish to post a letter to project over the Internet. This can be done at the following Whitney Museum of American Art website: <http://www.paperveins.org/mingwei/writing.html>)

2. Discuss the project with the class. The following is a list of suggested questions:

- Do you think this is a valuable project? Why/Why not?
- Do you agree with the following statement that appeared on the site? Why/Why not?
- Initially Mingwei was reading a batch of letters every night. Now Mingwei can no longer do this because he says that the letters are too powerful. What do you think about this statement?
- What do you think might happen to these "powerful" feelings if people don't find a way of expressing them?
- Do you agree with the following statement that appeared on the site? Why/Why not?
"It really seems that there is a need for this kind of work in our society, at a time when communication is everywhere, and yet it's perhaps losing its meaning. E-mail can be sent instantaneously, but it's not a contemplative kind of experience..."

3. Watch the following video clip from KQED's *With Eyes Open* website, in which various people who have experienced the death of a loved one, or are facing death themselves, share letters they have written to people in their lives. Students will then write letters of their own to a person or pet that has died. If you don't have Internet access, read the transcript of the broadcast online at: http://www.pbs.org/witheyopen/mourning_transcript.html

4. Ask each student to reflect on a person or pet that has died. Have each student write a letter to that person, or pet, in order to help them express their emotions, and work through their grief. Have each student write a letter to a person or a pet who has died. The following is a list of things you might have them include in the letter:

- How you feel
- What you miss
- What you want them to know
- What you might have wanted them to say to you when they were alive
- How you will remember them
- How they will stay a part of you

5. Decide as a class how you might share the letters. Make sure to honor a student's desire not to share what she or he has written.

Extension Activity

1. Divide the class into small groups. Have each group find a local or community resource that deals with grief and death and dying for youth. Find the group's mission, phone number, and website. Write a brief evaluation of what you think of the group's ideas based on what you've learned through the previous lessons.
2. Meet again as a whole group to share what the small groups have learned. Compile the information and create a classroom bulletin board, booklet, and/or web page to share with the rest of the school.

The Authors

KQED Education Network (KQED EdNet) inspires learning through innovative understanding, use and creation of media that respects diverse perspectives. KQED EdNet is committed to the exchange of ideas and resources in partnership with the community. To this end, it provides an instructional television service, curriculum materials, projects for youth and professional development for teachers, child care providers and families; organizes public forums; and sponsors local events.

Development of the teacher and parent guides was done in partnership with Maureen Carroll and Laurel Blaine, co-founders of Bay Breeze Educational Resources, LLC. Bay Breeze provides engaging K-12 technology-based curriculum that fosters the development of critical thinking skills through the use of the Internet, popular culture, and media.

© 2000 KQED