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As Parkland Community Grieves, Experts Predict Long Road to Recovery

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#) on [February 15, 2018 5:55 PM](#)

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Student Morgan Williams, who was present for the deadly Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, sent a wrenching tweet hours after the event—a small glimpse of what this shattered community faces: Traumatized students and staff members—and an uncertain path forward for dealing with the twinned issues of grief and remembrance.



Morgan Williams
@morganw_44

I cannot stop hearing the sound of the gun as he walked down my hallway. I cannot unsee my classmates who were shot get carried out by police. I cannot unsee the bodies on the floor. Please keep in mind the horror of what we've gone through today. [#prayfordouglas](#)

7:14 PM - Feb 14, 2018

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In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, which claimed at least 17 lives, Broward County had opened three grief counseling sites for Douglas students and community members, a hotline, and a separate counseling center for staff.

It was not immediately clear whether those services would be sustained or supplemented with other county mental-health resources. But what is clear, mental health experts said, is that the after-effects will take a long time to play out—and both students and faculty will need help.

"It's going to be a long road, and what we've seen is there tends to be lots of support in the first couple of months. And then the supports leave, and the school is left to deal with the long-term aftermath," said Melissa Reeves, the past president of the National Association of School Psychologists and a member of its school crisis team.

"It's really important that there's a continuity plan, that you have mental health professionals and school administrators working together on what these supports are going to look like in one month, two months, six months, or even a year down the road," she said.

No 'One Size Fits All'

Responding to a crisis like that at Parkland begins with doing psychological triage to assess the level of impact that the event had on different individuals, and to help them develop coping strategies, school psychology experts said.

Students with the most direct experience of trauma will probably need individualized support; other groups of students can be helped in smaller groups. Often, what is more powerful is simply reconnecting students, teachers, and families with their natural support systems.

For teenagers, that means being with other teenagers, which can help normalize some of their reactions, such as trouble sleeping, having flashbacks, and nightmares, said Thomas Demaria, an adjunct professor at Long Island University, who also serves on the board of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement.

The biggest mistake for Broward County officials to avoid, Reeves said, is using a "one size fits all" response, such as requiring all students or teachers to talk through what they experience.

"We don't ever want to impose a direct crisis intervention onto someone who is not wanting, or ready, to talk about it yet; we can do more harm than good," she said.

See also: [Five Years After the Sandy Hook Shootings, a Focus on Preventing Violence](#)

The experts noted, too, that trauma and grief are two separate things—and can interact in difficult ways. Grief, the experts explained,—unlike depression—tends to come and go. But for many students who lived through the shooting, it will be harder to process grief because it is tied up in a violent experience.

"Traumatic grief is an unnatural process—it was grief that was put upon you by violence. You weren't prepared for it," Demaria said. "For these students in the school, their memory of a loved one lost is clouded by the distraction of the traumatic experience. It's hard to go back and think of that person without also going back and thinking about the bullets flying."

For the long term, potentially the most powerful, if difficult to pull off, **approach to handling grief is training the entire school community—**from the principal down to the bus drivers and cafeteria workers—to recognize signs of grief and be ready to listen to students. That's the approach that the Coalition for Supporting Grieving Students, a group of organizations including The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, advocates for. Grief, experts like Demaria point out, can occur during a sporting event, a final exam, or study hall.

Finally, as the school shifts to thinking about how to commemorate and remember those lost in the violence, students should be part of it, Demaria said.

"Plans for memorials and commemoration to make sure we remember the loved ones in the school should be a collaborative process to help the students have input and make sure they are not passive," he said.

In Newtown, Conn., where 26 children were killed, **part of the process of grieving and rebirth meant ultimately razing the school building** and building a new one.

Photo: Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School grieve outside a counseling center in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 15, where counselors were available to meet with students following the mass shooting at the school.—Joel Auerbach/AP

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