

## **YOUNG PEOPLE AND GRIEF**

The grieving process is a normal, natural, and healing result of loss; and pain is to be expected. Young people of all ages exhibit grief and reactions. Guilt, anxiety, anger, fears, and sadness may be universal, and the expressions of these emotions may vary from day to day. Helping a young person and yourself through this difficult time may often feel overwhelming; however, knowledge of common reactions to loss may help you recognize behavior for what it is-- grieving.

### **POSSIBLE GRIEF REACTIONS:**

- Anger.
- Aggression/acting out: starting fights, outbursts of temper, drop in grades, change of peer affiliation.
- Explosive emotions: gentle tears, wrenching sobs, extremes in behavior.
- Physiological changes: fatigue, trouble sleeping, lack of appetite, headaches, stomach pains.
- Idealization of the deceased person.
- Sadness/emptiness/withdrawal: overwhelmed by feelings of loss when realizes person is not coming back; feels extremely vulnerable.
- Guilt/self-blame: "If only . . ."; "Why didn't I . . ." feels responsible for the loss; seeks self-punishment.
- Disorganization: restless, unable to concentrate, uncontrollable tears, difficulty focusing.
- Relief: natural feeling after a long illness; can be difficult to admit; may think they are the only one and so feels guilty.
- Lack of feelings: protection from pain; can be a form of numbness; may be difficult to admit and may generate guilt.

### **HOW TO HELP A YOUNG PERSON WHO IS EXPERIENCING GRIEF:**

- Permit or encourage the young person to talk about the person who has died. At the moment of loss and especially after the funeral, this is a vital part of the healing process. Often we want to avoid this important first step of acceptance and of healing.
- Use the terms "died/dead/death" rather than phrases like "passed away," or "taken from us." Young children can misinterpret these words and be afraid to go to sleep or that they also may be taken. Give an honest explanation for the person's death, avoiding clichés or easy answers. Straightforward, gentle use of words helps a person confront the reality of the death.
- Explain and accept that everyone has different reactions to death at different times. The reaction might not hit until the funeral or weeks later.

- Reassure the young person that his/her grief feelings are normal. There is no “right” way to react to a loss. Give permission to cry. Let them know it’s okay not to cry if the young person does not typically react in that way.
- Do not attempt to minimize the loss or take the pain away. Phrases like “Don’t worry, it will be okay,” “He had a good life,” or “He is out of pain” are **not** helpful. Grief is painful. There must be pain before there can be acceptance and healing. It is very difficult to do, but most helpful to acknowledge the person’s pain and permit them to live with it without trying to take it away or make it “better.”
- Encourage the young person to talk about their feelings. Encourage communication first in family, but also be aware of other support people such as clergy, trusted adult friends, and trusted peers.
- **LISTEN:** Listen with your heart. Listening to the feelings of the young person is most important. Listen through the silences. You just being there, showing you care by your listening is more important than knowing what to say or even saying anything at all.
- Help the young person decide about attending the funeral. The funeral can be a way to say goodbye, but abide by the young person’s wish and express understanding if he/she chooses not to go.

### **A GRIEVING PERSON’S NEEDS:**

- To cry.
- To be held.
- To talk.
- To be listened to.
- To feel caring around them to be with people they care about.
- To understand how others may react.

### **HELPING A STUDENT WITH GRIEF**

#### **DO**

- Allow the new loss issue to take precedence with classmates.
- Trust your instincts.
- Initiate discussion of the loss issue if students do not bring it up.
- Encourage students to attend the visitation, funeral, and memorial service.
- Consider an activity such as writing letters to the family.
- Emphasize positive forces in the student’s life; not everything is bad news.
- Realize that not talking about loss doesn’t make it go away.

- Encourage classmates to be a support system for the grieving student and his family.
- Communicate the knowledge that all feelings are okay and need to be expressed.
- Recognize that laughter and play don't mean the student did not love or care about the person who died.
- Remember the four T's in sympathy: Talk, Touch, Tears, and Time.

## **DON'T**

- Give advice, be judgmental, criticize, blame.
- Do most of the talking.
- Lie or tell half-truths to others.
- Use euphemisms like gone away, resting, asleep; do say died and dead.
- Be afraid to admit to a student that you don't know all the answers.
- Avoid the student.
- Minimize the loss.
- Change the subject.
- Use clichés, such as "Oh well, we all have to die sometime."
- Say, "I know how you feel."
- Believe a young person thinks the same as an adult.
- Attempt to become a substitute for the deceased person.
- Think that a student's busy activity level means s/he is being disrespectful or disinterested; s/he may simply need to move.

## **TYPICAL QUESTIONS STUDENTS MAY ASK**

### **Why does God let these bad things happen?**

You know, different people have different beliefs about God and why things happen. Perhaps your family could talk about that.

### **It's not fair.**

You're right, it's not fair. Some things in life happen that just aren't fair and this is one of them. It isn't fair when kids die.

### **Why did it have to happen to her/him?**

I don't know. We try to make sense out of life and sometimes it just doesn't fit.

### **I don't know how I can live without him/her?**

It's really hard when people close to us die and sometimes we feel like we can't go on. But that is something we have to do.

### **I feel so empty inside.**

It is a really empty feeling. Sometimes it feels like you don't know what to do. What are some of the things you've done since you've found out about this?

### **Why do I feel so awful and those other kids don't seem to care very much?**

It sounds like you are really sad and you miss her/him. But other people have different feelings and reactions. And that's okay for people to have whatever feelings they have.

### **It hurts so much. Why does there have to be so much pain?**

It hurts really badly when people you care about die. It may seem like the pain will last forever, but it doesn't. Over time things tend to get better.

### **I can't believe this happened. I was just with him/her yesterday.**

It's really hard to make sense of this. And sometimes the suddenness makes it even more difficult and hard to believe.

### **It's hard to come to school and listen to the teachers talk about math. I could care less about math.**

It's hard to focus on regular day-to-day stuff when your mind and heart are really torn up.

### **I hate him/her for leaving me. Why did he/she have to die? We were going to be together forever.**

I can see that you are upset. All of your hopes and dreams have changed. In a way, it's healthy to be angry about that.

## **FUNERAL ATTENDANCE GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS**

1. It is appropriate to dress up if you are planning to attend either the visitation or funeral.
2. Visitation is meant to provide a time to support family members and honor the person who has died.
3. Generally, visits are brief but some families will plan a formal prayer service during the visitation.
4. At visitation, the casket will be present and may be open. It is customary to view the casket and/or body. Some families will have a "kneeler" so that individuals may offer a short prayer.

5. The body may not look like the person you remember. Some people may gently kiss or touch the body.
6. It is okay to view the casket in small groups and it is okay to talk quietly but it is best not to congregate around the casket. Move away to allow others the opportunity to pay their respects.
7. Some people like to leave flowers or other remembrances. If there is not a table for this purpose, it is best to leave them with the family. It is not appropriate to place remembrances inside the casket.
8. It is appropriate to greet family members and express your sorrow. A simple statement such as "I'm sorry for your loss" will let the family know that you care.
9. Funeral services vary according to the religious preference of the family. It is respectful to follow the religious customs. Arrive at the church or funeral home early to allow time to sign the guest book and be seated.
10. Attendance at the cemetery is optional but it is important to leave soon after the services at the gravesite to give the family a time of privacy.