



Helping Your Child Cope with Sudden Loss

Young people respond to death in unique ways, and a wide range of reactions is possible. Your child's response will be influenced by his or her personality, relationship with the deceased person, what is happening in his or her life and ability to adjust to change. Whatever age your child is, he or she will need to find safe ways of expressing feelings. Your son/daughter may feel: confusion, anger, aggression, withdrawal, fear, guilt, denial, blame, betrayal, abandonment, hurt and sadness.

Young people who have experienced other stressful situations in their lives may find it harder to cope. These experiences may include the separation/divorce of parents, the death of a relative/pet and changing houses or schools. They may become upset and need to express their feelings about these other concerns, even if they had appeared to be coping. If your child is already using the services of a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist, make them aware of the death.

Children may have many questions. They may want to know exactly what happened. Details about the way a death occurred should not be detailed as it is unnecessary and this information is potentially harmful to their wellbeing. As parents, it is important to steer discussion towards the positive "help-seeking" actions that young people can take. This includes talking to a trusted adult, such as a parent, counsellor, teacher, priest, chaplain, relative or friend.

Reinforce the message, "Tell an adult if you are worried about a friend." This is an important message to share with your child, in any discussion about death via tragedy. Children and youth sometimes share their feelings about death with friends – in conversations, letters, emails, social media sites, text messages and on the internet. If they suspect a friend is struggling with their mental wellbeing, they should tell an adult immediately.

Be aware that you or your child may be affected by the media's responses to the event. You may choose to view the news together and discuss any concerns that are raised and ensure your child feels supported. Clarify that tragedies are rare and not the norm. Reinforce that positive coping methods (e.g. exercise, music, praying, drawing, engaging with friends, etc.) are good ways to address this stressful tragedy.

When you speak with other members of the community, reinforce that the best approach is to respect the bereaved/affected family. Avoid glamorizing or sensationalizing death and encourage help-seeking actions in young people. Young people should also encourage help-seeking in any friends they have concerns about.

Some reactions can happen weeks, months or even a year after an event. If you are concerned about your child's reaction and behaviour (such as changes in their socializing or school work) it is important to speak to the principal or student counselor at his/her school. This may result in a referral to a counselor for a mental health assessment and supports.

And, finally, please be aware that school staff may also be impacted by this sudden loss. While everyone is working towards normalizing school routines, some staff will be managing very difficult emotions. As we do all we can to support our staff as well as our students, let's practice extra patience and care, in the days and weeks ahead.

For more information about mental health or if you have any questions please contact the school board's Mental Health and Wellbeing Lead, Christine Preece, at chris.preece@st-clair.net



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