

## Common reactions to Grief

Common reactions can include:

- looking for the person who has died
  - having dreams about, or sensing the presence of, the person who has died
  - blaming themselves for the death
  - being easily distracted, forgetful
  - withdrawing, being quiet, showing a lack of response
  - being fretful, distressed, not wanting to go to school
  - feeling embarrassment; feeling different from others; may conceal their loss
  - physical complaints, such as tummy aches, headaches, aching
  - being irritable, having more tantrums, being defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behavior
  - changes in eating or sleeping habits be especially anxious about the safety of family and friends, and themselves
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- try very hard to please adults and not worry them, and so not let themselves grieve
  - feel stronger emotional reactions, such as anger, guilt, sense of rejection
  - want to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
  - feel embarrassment; feel different from peers; may conceal their loss
  - become more focused on what's happened and ask questions, think about it a lot, have dreams about it, and perhaps want to talk about it often to others

How to help them:

- frequently reassure them they are safe, and who is looking after them
- keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- tell them you know they are sad – start to use words that describe feelings
- keep separated from them as little as possible
- allow questions and provide honest answers
- comfort them with hugs, cuddles, holding their hand, and by encouraging them
- speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- let them know you understand their grief (validate their feelings)
- regular encouragement
- avoid expectations of adult behavior – allow them to be the age and stage they are

<u>Words that Do Comfort</u>	<u>Words that May Not Comfort</u>
I'm sorry.	Now he's in a better place.
I wish I had the right words, just know I care.	He is in a better place.
I'm thinking of you.	Time will heal you.
I care and want to help.	Think of all you have to be thankful for.
You are so important to me.	Just be happy that he's out of his pain.
I'm here for you.	He lived a long life.
If I were in your shoes, I think I'd feel that way too.	Be strong. You are holding up so well.
One of my favorite memories is...	Keep busy.
It seems so natural to cry at a time like this.	Try not to think about it.
I don't know what to say but I know this must be very difficult for you.	He wouldn't have wanted you to be sad.
Do you feel like talking for a while?	This is a blessing.
How do you feel today?	Now you have an angel in heaven. He was such a good person. God wanted to be with him
Give a hug instead of saying something	You shouldn't feel that way.
Saying nothing, just be with the person	You need to be strong.

## **What Adults Can Do**

*Be mindful of any comments made that can indicate a student has thought to hurt self or others*

*\* Follow protocol immediately\**

1. **Listen** – to what students want to share with you. It may be difficult but just listening can be a powerful healing force.
2. **Protect** – students from becoming re-traumatized. Sometimes other students may ridicule or bully students who are highly emotional or cry.
3. **Connect** – with students who have suffered a loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know that you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.
4. **Model** – adult behavior that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school. Maintain class and home routine and rules. Students need structure and routine.
5. **Anticipate & Minimize Triggers**- Expect that triggers may occur around holidays, Mother's Day and Father's Day, the child's birthday, the birthday of the deceased, or the anniversary of the person's death.

## **Death and Grief: Supporting Children & Youth Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates**

*Adapted from "Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents" in Helping Children at Home and School III, NASP, 2010 and from materials posted on the NASP website after September 11, 2001.*

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving.

Below are suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss:

- \* Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much.)
- \* Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship. Explain to children that their "regular" friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- \* Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc.
- \* Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better.
- \* Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions. Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

## **Resources**

Coping and Growing Through Grief  
Grief Speaks  
<http://www.griefspeaks.com/index.html>

Good Grief  
<https://good-grief.org/>