

Guidelines for Parents and Other Adult Caregivers to Help Teens Following a Death or Other Crisis in Their Community

Provided by Willow House (Chicago, IL)

www.WillowHouse.org

With special thanks to Helen Fitzgerald



1. Give your teen the facts in a simple, straightforward manner. If you don't have answers to certain questions, it's okay to say "I don't know the answer to that question, but I will try to find out."
2. Use direct, concrete language. Say the words that apply: "accident" "dead" "critical condition" "suicide" "survivor" or "victim".
3. Ask questions, "What are you feeling?" "What have you heard from your friends?" "What do you know about what happened?" This gives you as a parent a chance to determine that your teen has accurate facts and not some scenario that came out of rumors, which can and do travel quickly among teens in any community. Repeat this process, making sure they have accurate information and ask directly if there is any information that needs further explanation.
4. In the case of a suicide death, educate your teen that suicide is sometimes the end result of a mental illness. Just like cancer is a disease in the body, with mental illness there is a disease in the brain. Sadly, medical treatments don't always cure the disease.
5. Share some of your feelings about the event with your teen. Identify and talk about these feelings. You are their role model. Share your feelings of sadness, grief, sympathy and concern for the family and community affected by the tragedy. Your sharing openly empowers your teen to express feelings more comfortably, and helps to teach empathy and concern for others.
6. Keep in mind the age and level of comprehension of your teen and speak to that level. You don't want to overwhelm them with too much information and/or feelings that might be problematic for them.
7. End each conversation with a nurturing hug and supportive, encouraging words.
8. If your teen is feeling insecure and frightened, they will need reassurance from you, a lot of touching and contact with you. Over time this will help your teen to relax and feel less fearful.
9. Don't hesitate to refer to the deceased by name. The person may be dead, but he or she is a person to be remembered, not spoken about in hushed pronouns.
10. Talk about the funeral and/or memorial service. Describe in detail what happens there and give your teen a choice about whether or not they want to attend. Think and talk about other ways they can say "goodbye" if they want to and if their relationship with the deceased calls for that. This might also may include ways of

expressing feelings and “sympathies” to the family, perhaps, by presenting flowers or writing a note.

11. Depending upon your religious views you may want to talk about your belief about what happens when someone dies. Be careful not to say things like, “It was God’s will”, etc. Statements like this raise more concerns and questions than they answer and can be particularly disturbing to adolescents.
12. Remind your teen that you are available to talk about any questions or concerns they may have. Don’t, however, always wait for them to raise the subject. Check in with them from time to time.
13. Friends, family, neighbors, schoolmates often find solace and comfort in doing something to honor the person who died; for example, providing a memorial or advocating for a related cause.
14. Teens, in particular, find it helpful to gather with their friends, to “process” the experience by sharing and comparing feelings and by memorializing the person who died as a group.
15. Sudden, violent death, or death of a young person is especially hard to grieve, and disruption of sleep, appetite and daily activities are normal responses.
16. Some symptoms of ongoing internal stress include:
 - Withdrawal from friends and/or school activities
 - Little or total lack of emotion regarding the loss or event
 - Prolonged inability to acknowledge that the event has happened
 - Extreme reactions to the grief and/or fear that last a long time
 - Changes in health
 - Prolonged depression
 - Use of alcohol or drugs
 - Extreme changes in behaviors
17. If you find that your teen is developing problems that you don’t know how to handle, don’t hesitate to seek professional help.
18. Remember, grief is a natural, normal response to death.
19. As a parent and role model, ask yourself how you can turn this tragedy into a learning experience that will empower you, your family, and your teen.