

# Helping your child when someone dies



## General Guidelines for Parents and Caregivers

**Young people react in different ways**, within different timeframes, so providing a warm, secure and accepting environment will help with grieving.

The following reactions may occur:

**Emotional/Behavioural:** Crying and sadness, hopelessness or inadequacy feelings, attention-seeking behaviour, rebellion and disobedience at school and home, decreased school performance and school work, avoidance of school or sport or social activities, increased stress, tension or depression, anti-social and risk-taking behaviour, or even lack of emotion or any unusual behaviour.

**Regressive:** Young people may display behaviours more in keeping with younger age groups, such as wanting to be around parents more or checking where you are, less interest in socialising or wanting to spend more time with friends, and sometimes they may seem less responsible or sure of themselves.

**Physiological:** Nausea / tummy upsets, headaches, vomiting, eating changes, disturbed sleep or nightmares, skin disorders.

- Adolescents have a need to have their feelings accepted by their peers and they tend to seek their comfort and support, spending hours going over the events of the incident together.
- Parents should not feel excluded. Young people feel more secure because they know you are in the background.
- It's ok to use the terms dead, death, died, or culturally or religion-appropriate language.
- Feel free to express your emotions, within your own level of comfort. However, seeing extremely distressed parents or teachers can unsettle adolescents.
- Unjustified feelings of guilt may surface. Don't brush these aside. Talking this through helps to reassure the young person.
- Be alert for anger outburst and aggression, particularly with young men. This can be their way of unloading and resolving pent up emotions. Involvement in football or a hard run is a tried and true solution. Others get their relief from a punching bag. Pulling a pillow apart has been known to allow physical exertion, laughter and a covert tear or two.
- Keep a check on rash decision-making. Decisions about leaving school, changing goals or giving up social or sporting activities should be delayed.
- Be ready to talk about the young person's fears and anxieties if they have concerns about something happening to loved ones or themselves.
- For some adolescents the experience may have challenged their sense of security and they can become overcautious and reluctant to take risks. Others may become involved in reckless or dangerous behaviour.
- If your adolescent displays strong emotional reactions though having had little or no contact with the deceased, do not be overly concerned. Some young people use these times to dwell on the complexities of life or to grieve about another loss.

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## Parents can help by:

- Reassuring the child that these overwhelming feelings are normal in the circumstances and will pass with time.
- Listening and talking to them about what has happened.
- Recognising that there is no one standard way to deal with a loss. Some people react immediately with obvious signs of grief. Others take longer to come to terms with the reality and may react later, but with much less outwards emotion. Some prefer to grieve privately.
- Trying to keep continuity in home, school and sporting activities.

If you have ongoing concerns please talk to an Associate Principal, Principal, or one of the Student Central team, and further support can be arranged.

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