

## Grief and Loss

Each of us is an individual and, as such, we all grieve differently. However, there are some common experiences we all share as we are grieving. As you progress through some of these stages, there are some things you can do to help yourself. It is important to note that it is always a good idea to talk to a trusted adult (a parent, teacher, school counselor, coach, etc.) about the difficulty you are having. You shouldn't go through this on your own and, although friends are often your best source of support, many students need more than that.

Some common ways children and adolescents might respond to death or loss include:

- Sadness
- Denial, shock and confusion
- Anger
  - At the person who died
  - At doctors and nurses for not saving the life of the person who died
  - At teachers and parents
- Loss of appetite/disrupted sleep
- Fear
  - Of being alone
  - Of dying themselves
  - Of getting close to others who might die
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches
- Loss of concentration
- Guilt
  - That they could not prevent the loss
  - That they caused the sickness, illness, tragedy or death
  - That they could not save the person from dying
  - That they are having fun while someone else is sick, dead or dying
- Depression or a loss of interest in daily activities and events
- Actions more appropriate to a younger age
- Boisterous behavior
- Reckless behavior
- Abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Yearning and pining for the deceased

Parents, these reactions and behaviors are considered normal in the weeks following death or loss. However, should these responses continue and interfere with your son's or daughter's ability to function on a day to day basis, it is time to seek help.

Additional signs that outside help is needed would be . . .

- Expression of suicidal or homicidal thoughts or intentional self-harm (for example, student cutting on him/herself)
- Increase in "negative" behaviors such as lying, aggression, stealing, drug/alcohol use, verbal

- threats or any behavior putting a student at increased risk
- Signs of depression - loss of goals and interests, low energy, poor sleep, change in appetite, irritability, withdrawal from friends and family

Please contact school guidance at 862-4111 if you have concerns about your son or daughter.

Additional community resources:

- Your primary care provider or pediatrician
- Acadia Hospital Pediatric Outpatient Services, which provides mental health evaluation Monday-Friday at 10:00 A.M. (Parents can call Access Center at 973-6048 to arrange next day appointment.)
- Community Health and Counseling Center Youth Crisis Hotline: 1-800-499-9130
- Information and referral information line @ 211

## **Trauma**

Individuals can experience trauma as a result of an acute event, a natural disaster for example, but also for any other event or events that cause a disruption to a person's view of the world as a safe place. Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world.

Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic but your subjective, emotional experience of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized. A stressful event is most likely to be traumatic if . . .

- \* It happened unexpectedly.
- \* You were unprepared for it.
- \* You felt powerless to prevent it.
- \* It happened repeatedly.
- \* Someone was intentionally cruel.
- \* It happened in childhood.

Some of our students have experienced some form of trauma as a result of recent deaths of classmates. It is common for individuals to have a stress reaction (sometimes called an "emotional aftershock"). These stress reactions can occur immediately or a few days, weeks, or even months later. The signs and symptoms of such a response can last for a few days or longer. With understanding and support of loved ones the stress reactions often pass quickly. In some cases, the emotional stress is so great that professional counseling is necessary.

Common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction:

PHYSICAL

Nausea  
Upset stomach  
Tremors  
Feeling uncoordinated  
Profuse sweating  
Chills  
Diarrhea  
Chest Pain (should be checked at a hospital)  
Rapid heart beat  
Rapid breathing  
Increased blood pressure  
Headaches  
Muscle aches  
Sleep disturbances

MENTAL

Slowed thinking  
Difficulty making decisions  
Difficulty with problem solving  
Confusion  
Disorientation  
Difficulty with concentration  
Memory problems  
Distressing dreams  
Poor attention span  
Difficulty naming common objects  
Envisioning the event over and over  
Feeling numb

EMOTIONAL

Anxiety  
Fear  
Guilt  
Grief  
Depression  
Sadness  
Feeling isolated abandoned or lost  
Shock  
Anger  
Irritability  
Wanting to hide from or limit contact  
with others  
Worry about others

Ways family members and friends can help people dealing with reactions to trauma:

- \* Listen carefully.
- \* Spend time with them.
- \* Reassure them that they are safe/okay.
- \* Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- \* Help them with everyday tasks like homework.
- \* Give them some private time.
- \* Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- \* Don't tell them they are "lucky" they still have other friends; instead tell them that you are sorry for their loss and that you want to understand and assist them.

If the symptoms above are severe or if they last longer than six weeks, the person may need professional counseling. Contact your family doctor, a school counselor or nurse or a local mental health provider.