



Grief Support for Children and Adults

For Teachers and Parents Helping Teens with Grief from Suicide

Be honest with yourself. Recognize that you are grieving too.

Be honest about your feelings. Share what you are feeling with your students, share with them through simple statements and comments about what you do to express and cope.

Be honest with the limits of your knowledge. The death may raise questions about what it feels like to die and what happens after death. You won't be able to answer many of their questions. Ask what they think so you can hear what their actual worries or concerns are.

Provide opportunities for feeling expression. When we grieve it is often a mixture of anger and sadness. Allow time for their tears. Let the students know that crying is a normal reaction to the death of a classmate and of a loved one.

Maintain class and home routine and rules. Students need structure and routine. Even with the interruption of a funeral or memorial service, your return to routine will provide reassurance to the students that life does go on.

Add feeling-related activities to your regular curriculum. The need to express feelings about the loss will continue for all your students. Many people are kinesthetic learners. In particular, the kinesthetic student is particularly comforted by art and writing projects built around feeling themes. Stories about coping with death and loss can be incorporated into the classroom reading activities. It is important to continue to provide opportunities for feeling expression. Talk about the student who died, use their name, remember their life.

Honor and affirm your privileged position. This is a time you have a very healing influence on your students. Showing them how to handle grief in even these small ways will help them in the future.

Words that Do Comfort the Grieving Student

I'm sorry.
I'm thinking of you.
I care.
You are so important to me.
I'm here for you.
I want to help.
If I were in your shoes, I think I'd
feel that way to.
One of my favorite memories of
_____ (use the name of the
person or pet) is . . .

It seems so natural to cry at a
time like this.
I don't know what to say but I know
this must be very difficult for you.
Do you feel like talking for a
while?
How do you feel today?

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL - When an individual is in severe emotional pain, there is often the desire to avoid that pain by "numbing out". Unfortunately, drugs and alcohol are readily available to most teens and the use of these chemicals can become particularly attractive while grieving. A survey in a California drug and rehabilitation hospital for adolescents indicated that 86% to 92% of their patients had experienced the loss of someone *significant* in their life. The majority of these teens revealed that the *abuse* of these drugs occurred following the death, as they knew no other way out of their pain. Teens need to understand and process highly charged emotions and have concrete tools to assist them in their healing process. Teens need to learn that the use of drugs and alcohol merely puts their grief "on hold" and ultimately prolongs and complicates their recovery.

VIOLENT BEHAVIOR - When a death occurs, teens may be tempted to "strike out" not knowing what to do with their anger. When there is no understanding of the grief process and no safe place to vent these feelings of pain and confusion, violent or reckless behavior may often occur. Approximately 300 incarcerated teens were surveyed at a California Youth Authority facility. *Ninety-six percent* of those surveyed indicated that someone *significant* in their life had died. The average number of losses per teen was *SIX*. Rarely is an individual raised in an environment where anger is understood to be healthy and normal. We are usually punished for displaying anger or told to "calm down". Teens need to learn that anger is a very human response, but with that response comes the responsibility not to hurt ourselves or others. Teens must respect their feelings of anger and design healthy methods for their expression. Anger turned inward can lead to a lifetime of undefined depression.

SELF ESTEEM - A teen who is given the opportunity to understand and process their feelings of loss will feel *empowered* with the tools to handle losses that will continue to occur throughout life. Rather than becoming victimized, they frequently become our "wounded healers" reaching out to other troubled teens. While we cannot always change the circumstances that occur in life, we do have a choice as to how we will allow it to impact our lives and consequently the lives of those we love.