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# Helping a Young Person after Loss

**Be a good listener**

Grieving people need to talk about their loss, acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. You can't fix their grief but you can be there, hear their story, and share their journey.

**Be a shoulder to cry on**

Allow them to cry with you, crying helps the release of emotions and this helps with healing.

**Be in touch with them**

Drop in, call on the telephone and say "I was thinking of you today" write a letter, send an email, remember special days like Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries.

When someone has experienced a loss, there will be big and small adjustments to be made in their lives. These could bring uncertainty, frustration, fear, sadness and change as each new day comes along. Grief is about adapting to change in life, thoughts, hopes, beliefs and the future.

**Be a friend**

Often being there is all that is needed to support someone who is grieving.

(Adapted from the writings of Doris Zagdanski)





## Helping a young person after loss

### After a Death...

It is very important for families, schools and health professions to make themselves available to the grieving adolescent.

Adults need to provide a safe environment for the young person to discuss in detail the meaning and values that go with significant loss.

It is important that young people have access to positive support networks where they have the opportunity to talk when they want, especially within the family. This may be extremely difficult for parents who are attempting to deal with their own personal grief. Young people feel alienated and isolated because friends may not understand.

Things that are helpful include good communication in the family, ability to share the death experience with others, and reliance on the family for emotional support.

Things that may lead to difficulties include withdrawal from family, discussions, activities and a reluctance to talk about the experience of death.

### The young person's reactions...

Young people may give adult caregivers mixed messages. They may hide their true feelings and thoughts and pretend that everything is O.K.

When attempting to understand adolescent grief you need to consider the young person's age and level of maturity as well as the nature of the loss encountered. Such losses may include death,

termination of a pregnancy, sexual assault, death of a pet, and divorce.

Young people, unlike children, are more likely to understand that death is final and permanent. However, there is a tendency for young people to consider themselves immortal.

Many emotions occur for the young grieving person, including shock, guilt, anger, and extreme sadness.

There may be changes in behaviour such as going back to younger behaviours, tears, anxiety, withdrawal, thoughts of suicide, an increase or decrease in sexual activity and possibly the use of drugs/ or alcohol to help block feelings.

Young people react in a similar way to adults, with reactions to the loss often being unique and individual for each.

### Talking about the loss...

Talking about the loss may help in releasing feelings and thoughts and prevent young people bottling them up unnecessarily.

Clear, simple, truthful information will prevent mis-interpretations, assumptions and fantasizing about the unknown. Information may need to be repeated several times as it can be difficult to take in all information at once. The young person may need to talk more than once and to share his/her thoughts and feelings, so adults need to be prepared to listen. Encourage questions. Encourage the telling of stories and sharing of memories about the loss. Support the young person through the funeral and encourage as much participation as possible, without being forceful or demanding.

Allow the young person to make his/her own decisions. Dictating to the young person and making decisions will not be effective, unless they have given you permission to do so.

### Supporting the young person...

- Attempt to understand the young person's behaviour, views and the impact the loss may have for him/her.

- Talk freely about the loss without giving advice.
- Encourage the adolescent to share his/her experience.
- Try not to avoid the subject, which may leave the young person feeling alone and isolated.
- Photos may assist in sharing special moments and memories.
- Encourage talking about dreams as these may assist with important insights into unconscious thoughts and beliefs.
- Suggest writing a letter. This can be helpful because it allows safe self-expression. It might also be a way to work through unresolved issues, as well as saying goodbye.
- Creative writing activities such as poetry, or a collage of words and/or pictures that remind the young person of the loss is a way to express emotions positively.
- Attending the funeral, lighting candles in memory of the loss and visiting significant places may also be beneficial to the young person.

### Help is Available

**KIDS HELPLINE**  
1800 55 1800

A free call helpline for young people

### SEASONS FOR GROWTH

A peer support program about change & loss  
Contact the Centre for Loss & Grief for more information.

