

Maine Suicide Prevention Program

How to Support a Grieving Youth; Tips for Parent/Caregiver

2022

Grief is the natural reaction to a death or other significant loss. Grief over the loss of a loved one or another significant relationship may forever change someone's life. The grief reaction to suicide or any sudden traumatic loss typically includes expression of shock, disbelief, denial, anger, guilt and shame. Be alert of any tendency to feeling responsible for the loss or to blame others.

The suicide or traumatic loss of a friend or classmate can trigger a complex form of grief for children and teens. Youth will need your help and your support; provide them with information, understanding and comfort. Follow normal routines as much as is possible, while encouraging opportunities to talk and process the loss. Routines can provide a sense of comfort and safety to a grieving youth.

Youth express their reactions to a crisis in different ways. Youth may show anger, get upset easily, become more dependent on reassurance, want to talk, or withdraw to make sense of it themselves. Younger children may be more open about their feelings than older children and teens. Remember that seeming numb or withdrawing does not mean they are not experiencing strong emotions! Create a time and setting to talk about the loss. It is important to create these times while still allowing an adolescent choices about the who, when and where. And if they are not comfortable talking about their grief with you, then who else can you reach out to; extended family, a close adult friend, a pastor, etc.

Often boys may show and process grief differently than girls. In general, girls are more comfortable showing a range of emotional expression and more comfort and need to talk about their feelings with someone as they process the loss. Boys can easily withdraw and become more isolated in their grief; they may seek to “do something” more than talk about the loss. These are gender generalities but are common.

The following lists provide ideas for you as you support your youth.

Do:

- Create the time and space to talk about the loss. Limit intrusive noises or interruptions.
- Invite them to share their story of the loss and **Listen**, no matter what
- Reassure him/her that he/she is not responsible; it is not their fault!
- Recognize the age and developmental stage of the youth regarding what you share.
- Be absolutely genuine and truthful; share the facts, if not the details
- Remain attentive and remember, you cannot “fix” grief, it needs to be felt.
- Encourage talking about feelings and about the deceased person!
- Allow crying--perhaps lots of crying and acknowledge anger may be also present
- Expect laughter--a sign of happy memories
- Follow the lead of the “survivor” with patience and kindness
- Offer opportunities for remembering the good times, i.e., special events, birthdays
- Expect that your presence may be important, while talking may be limited (“Silence is Golden”)
- Share some of your experience with loss, but keep the focus on the person you are supporting



Suicide Prevention
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- Offer to attend the visitation or funeral with a youth
- Help to identify others to talk to (i.e., minister, priest, rabbi, family friend or counselor)
- Encourage expression of feelings by writing poems, songs, letters or making a scrapbook.
- Recognize that grieving is exhausting; sleep and rest are vital (for them and for you!)
- Allow time; lots of time if the person was family or a close friend. Grief takes time.

Avoid:

- Saying things like “I know how you feel”. Instead ask...
- Giving a lot of advice
- Arguing over trivial matters
- Making moralistic statements about the person who died
- Minimizing the loss
- Discouraging or time-limiting the grieving process

Always, when talking to youth about suicide, be clear that suicide is never a solution to any problem.

Watch for Red Flags

- Grief symptoms should diminish over time; watch for grief that seems “stuck”
- Be alert for significant signs of Depression or Anxiety
- Any tendency for self-blame or taking responsibility for the loss
- Not beginning to return to normal activities and function after a couple of weeks
- Any signs or talk about suicide

Pay attention to changes in your child’s behavior over time, being especially attentive to [suicide warning signs](#). Anniversary dates may be times where increased vigilance is needed. If you see behaviors that worry you and/or include the red flags, consider reaching out for help. Connect with your child’s school counselor, a community therapist, pastor, or primary care provider. If you are concerned about immediate safety, contact the Maine Crisis Line by call or text at **1-888-568-1112**.

Grieving a loss can be a scary and difficult time in the life of a youth. Grief passes over time, and we reconnect with our lives, marked by the loss and often wiser and more mature.



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