

Adolescent Response to the Unexpected Death of a Peer

The sudden loss of a classmate or friend can strongly impact a young person. In general, the depth of their response is related to how close they felt to the deceased, but not always. A vulnerable youth or one who has faced other losses can be hard hit by the death of a peer. Though some teens may seem to avoid parental or other adult counsel, following the sudden death of a friend, it is an important time for parents and caregivers to closely monitor the effect on your child and to check in with them and assist them to process this loss. For many teens, this may be the first death of someone close to them or of their own age.

Possible Youth reactions can include a range of responses including:

guilt	denial	acting out
anger	anxiety	withdrawal
relief	fear	helplessness
blame	confusion	shock

Helping bereaved youth

Parents and caregivers in contact with a young person who has been bereaved by the death of a peer can play a vital role in supporting their youth through a difficult period. This is a time when confusion and conflicted emotions can be expected as the youth feels a combination that might include anger, guilt, denial, and even relief. They may have difficulty identifying and expressing their thoughts and feelings, especially to adults, as adolescence is also the time when they are trying to become more independent. Below are some ideas for working with a bereaved youth.

Potential strategies to help a grieving youth

- Remember that young people cannot control where, when, or how they will be affected by their grief. Be patient and try to create times when it is OK to talk.
- Answer questions honestly, providing factual information. Ask what they know about and believe about the death of their peer. Be gently persistent if they are reluctant to talk.
- Understand and allow for the level of the adolescent's development and maturity.
- Remember that you cannot take away the loss, but you can assist young people as they explore and express their grief.
- Recognize that the adolescent's assumptions about control and safety may be challenged or lost.
- Know your own feelings about the cause of death. If you cannot help a bereaved adolescent without judging or blaming, be prepared to make referrals to another responsible adult the youth knows and trusts or a counselor.
- Remember that adolescents may not be asking you to fix things for them. All they may want is someone to listen to them in an accepting and nonjudgmental way.

Signs of Potentially Traumatic Grief:

- Lasting preoccupation with the deceased person
- Focus on death themes or on suicide
- Withdrawal and isolation from family and friends
- Disturbances in sleep or appetite

If you are concerned about the safety or stability of your youth, seek information, support and assessment as needed. Call the Clark County Crisis Hotline at 360-696-9560 or 1-800-626-8137 and/or Youth Suicide Prevention Program at 1-800-273-8255 and ask about getting help.