



## Parent Guidelines for Responding to a Death

It is important to note that most children and teens will get through the effects of a death with support from family, friends and school personnel. Their response to a death can be viewed as “a normal response to an extraordinary situation.” While the emotional effects of learning about a death can be significant and can potentially influence functioning for weeks to months, most children and teens will return to behaving and feeling more like themselves again.

Following are descriptions of responses likely to be observed in children and teens:

**Regression in Behavior:** Children and teens who have been informed of a death (especially a sudden death) often engage in behaviors that are similar to children younger than them. This is especially true of toddlers, preschool and elementary school children. They may return to behavior that they’ve previously outgrown (e.g., thumb sucking, bed-wetting, fears of the dark). Children may also exhibit separation anxiety, clinging to parents and resistance to leaving the parents’ side. They may resist going to bed alone. Bladder and bowel control may be temporarily lost in younger children.

**Increase in Fears and Anxiety:** Children and teens can also experience and express an increase in their fears and worries. They may become afraid of situations they had mastered previously. They may become fearful of the dark and refuse to go to bed alone. A school phobia may emerge where the child or teen refuses to go to school for fear of something happening and/or fear of leaving their parents. They may openly verbalize their fear of something happening to themselves, their friends, or their family. It is important that parents don’t allow the child to remain home as a means to deal with their anxiety. This will result in the anxiety increasing once the child or teen needs to return to school. Due to the increase in fears, additional demands are made for parent attention and support. Adolescents and teens may experience a more generalized anxiety and not the specific types of fears that are seen in younger children.

**Decreased Academic Performance and Poor Concentration:** Given the increase in anxiety and the disruption learning about a death can have on children’s and teens’ sense of safety and security, there is naturally a decrease in the amount of mental energy and focus available to learn and complete academic assignments. Difficulty concentrating and focussing on academics is normal in the immediate aftermath.

**Increased Aggression and Resistant Behavior, and Decreased Frustration Tolerance:** Children who have experienced the death of someone close to them can experience difficulty controlling their anger and frustration. Situations that would not have caused a heightened emotional response in the past, can result in an aggressive response and/or expression of frustration after the death. Adolescents may also exhibit an increase in resistant behavior, refusing to follow rules and regulations at

school and home, and/or meet their responsibilities (e.g., chores, academic assignments).

**Increased Irritability, Emotional Lability and Depressive Feelings:** In the aftermath of learning about a death, children and teens can express stronger and more variable emotional responses to situations. There could be symptoms of depression that include a general sense of sadness, difficulty falling and remaining asleep or sleeping more than normal, change in eating habits, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, social withdrawal, mental and physical fatigue and/or suicidal ideation. In younger children there may be an increase in irritability and moodiness.

**Denial:** In an effort to cope with the psychological and emotional ramifications of a death, some children and teens may deny that the death has occurred and/or deny the significance of the person or their death. For example, a child whose mother has died suddenly may demand that he can return home so that they can watch their favorite television program together or a teen whose favorite teacher was badly injured in a car accident may insist that he will recover fully, despite the medical evidence that indicates that this will not happen. Children and teens who continue to utilize denial to cope may need to be confronted in a sensitive but straight forward manner. Anger and resentment may be expressed when confronting the child with the reality. In time, and with support, children do come to accept the reality of a situation.

**What types of reactions may *parents* experience after a crisis situation has occurred that involves themselves and/or their child?**

As in the case of children and teens, the answer to this question is dependent on a number of variables including personal history, personality variables, severity and proximity of the event, level of social support and type and quality of intervention.

Typical reactions that are experienced by adults include:

- denial
- feelings of detachment
- unwanted, intrusive recollections
- depression
- concentration difficulty
- anxiety
- psychosomatic complaints
- hypervigilance
- withdrawal
- eating disturbance
- irritability and low frustration tolerance
- sleep difficulty
- poor work performance
- loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- emotional and mental fatigue
- emotional lability

Since you are likely to be affected by the death, either directly through your own grief or indirectly through your child's grief, it is imperative that you also receive support. When you take the needed steps to care for yourself, you then have an increased capacity to meet the needs of your child. It is important that you have a forum to discuss your own feelings and reactions to the death and receive support. Look to trusted family members, other parents, friends, and/or school support personnel (e.g., psychologist, guidance counselor) to share your feelings. If the symptoms outlined above persist and continue to interfere with your ability to function, professional consultation may be beneficial.

### **What can parents do to address the reactions of their child to a crisis situation?**

As parents, you are one of the most influential factors in supporting your child through the emotional consequences of a death. Since you are in a position to be the most emotionally involved with your child, your support, encouragement and reassurance matters. While you may be frequently pained and frustrated that you can't do more to alleviate your child's suffering, please remember that being present for them and showing that you care does make a difference.

The following are things you can do to support your child's reactions to a crisis situation:

- Speak to your child regarding the death and provide them with accurate information regarding the death in language that they can understand.
- Help your child feel that they're allowed to express their thoughts and feelings regarding the death without the fear that they'll be judged negatively. Listen carefully to your child and show them that you understand what they're feeling.
- Reassure your child that you will continue to be there for them, and that you will see them through the aftermath of the death.
- Provide reassurance only where true and appropriate. No false statements regarding the future should be made in an effort to help your child feel better in the present. This will only lead to false hopes and distrust in the future.
- Be open to providing additional affection in the form of hugs and other physical contact if your child seeks this.
- You will most likely need to keep in touch with your child's teacher to monitor their academic performance.
- Spend additional individual time with your child. Try to structure your time with them by playing games, having discussions and going places. During your time together, focus a majority of your attention on your child.

- You may need to monitor the adjustment of your teen from somewhat of a distance since their primary support group may be their peers. Don't be hesitant to ask your teen how they're coping even though you may expect an answer of "fine." The fact that you ask will most likely be important to your child, even if they don't show this.
- Monitor your teen for increased use of alcohol or drugs. There may be an attempt to "self-medicate" by using these substances. Also monitor your teen for increased symptoms of depression.
- Regardless of your teen's response to you, reassure them that you are there if they need help and/or assistance. You may want to outline just how you can help them (e.g., by talking, by getting them professional help).

### **When should your child receive additional help in the form professional intervention?**

With support and reassurance from you, their friends, and others in your family, intervention from school personnel, and the passage of time, your child should be able to move through the effects of a death and return to behaving and feeling more like themselves. However, there is a chance that your child, due to the nature of the death itself and due to their psychological makeup, history and ability to respond to support, will continue to experience difficulties which interfere with their wellbeing and functioning. If the symptoms outlined above persist, your child is probably in need of further, and probably more individual, intervention.

The following are guidelines for determining if your child requires additional intervention from professionals trained in addressing bereavement and traumatic stress:

- your child can not reengage in home-based responsibilities and in school-based assignments and activities several weeks after the death and/or after a majority of their peers are able to do so,
- your child continues to express high levels of emotional responsiveness (e.g., crying, tearfulness) several weeks after the death,
- your child appears depressed, withdrawn and non-communicative,
- your child continues to exhibit poorer academic performance and a decreased capacity for concentration,
- your child expresses suicidal or homicidal ideation, or your child is intentionally hurting themselves (e.g., cutting),
- your child exhibits an apparent increase usage of alcohol or drugs,
- your child gains or loses a significant amount of weight in a short period of time,
- your child shows significant changes in behavior that persist for several weeks, and
- your child stops attending to their hygienic needs.