

How to Support a Grieving Youth

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



Grief is the natural reaction to a death or other significant loss and can forever change someone's life. Grief reactions to suicide or any traumatic loss often include feelings of shock, disbelief, denial, anger, guilt, and shame. Some people turn grief inward and blame themselves, while others may be angry at people around them.

Following the suicide or traumatic loss of a friend, classmate, or loved one, children and teens may experience grief that is just as complex as it is for adults. It is important not to minimize or dismiss their feelings or other grief reactions and to provide support and understanding. Youth may have different emotional or social reactions to loss, such as anger, sadness, seeking reassurance, wanting to talk, or withdrawing from those around them. Grief can also show itself physically, such as stomach aches or headaches and quite often does in children.

It's important to give young people space to process a loss, letting them decide when, where, and to whom they want to express their thoughts and feelings. Like adults, some youth may struggle to find the words to explain how they feel but may seek to "do something" to help them process the loss. Provide lots of options for youth to express themselves, such as art, music, or physical activity. Consider ways they can be meaningfully involved in planning memorials or acknowledging the person who died, and offer to attend any services with them.

Every young person will deal with loss and manage grief differently. Here are some ways you can help:

- Create the time and space to talk about and process the loss. Try to find a quiet place where you can limit interruptions and listen to their story without giving advice or offering suggestions.
- Start the conversation with something simple like, *"I'm so sorry you're going through this. How are you feeling and how can I support you?"*
- Reassure them that they are not responsible for the actions of other people, and the death is not their fault.
- Consider the age and developmental stage of the young person when sharing information. Be genuine and honest, focusing on sharing facts rather than details.
- Help them understand there is no "right" way to grieve, and that however they express themselves – crying, anger, or laughter – they are normal. Encourage creativity to process grief and loss.
- Provide lots of chances to talk about the person who has died, and to share both sad and happy memories. Talk about important events and help them think about how they might feel on birthdays or anniversaries.
- Not every young person wants to talk and that's okay, too. Be present for them in other ways; you can cook a meal together, go for a walk, or play a game.
- Model how to talk about grief. Share some of your own feelings and experiences, but keep the focus on them and what they need.
- Continuing to follow regular routines can provide a sense of comfort and safety during the grieving process.
- Provide opportunities to connect with other caring adults, such as extended family, school counselors, clergy, or coaches. Normalize reaching out for help or talking to a counselor.
- Recognize that grieving is exhausting; sleep and rest are vital (for them and for you!)
- Allow young people to walk their grief journey in their own time and in their own way; Follow their lead with patience and kindness.

Signs that a young person may need more help:

- While it's normal to have strong reactions to grief, these should start to decrease over time; Watch for feelings that persist, get worse, or signs that a young person is struggling to cope.
- Be aware of significant signs of depression, anxiety, or changes in behavior, such as not wanting to go to school, failing classes, or withdrawing from friends and activities.
- Listen for expressions of self-blame or taking responsibility for the loss.
- Every young person grieves on their own timeline. Be aware if they are struggling to find a “new normal” that allows them to move forward with daily life.
- Respond immediately if a young person shows warning signs or says they are thinking about suicide.

Grieving a loss can be a scary and difficult time in the life of a young person. As we process, or mourn, the death, the intensity of grief will typically lessen over time. Mourning allows us to weave the losses and grief into our lives, often resulting in growth. Be mindful that children tend to revisit the death at different developmental stages to process the events with new skills and abilities. These stages, as well as anniversary dates may be times where increased attention is needed.

If you see behaviors that worry you, reach out for help. Connect with your child’s school counselor, a community therapist, clergy, or primary care provider. Call 211 to learn about resources in your area. **If you are concerned about immediate safety, contact the Maine Crisis Line by calling or texting 988.**

To talk with someone who will listen and help connect you to support: Contact griefsupport@namimaine.org or 1-800-464-5767, ext. 2317

For more information, visit [NAMI Maine](#) *After Suicide or Traumatic Loss*



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & SUPPORT

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) “Children, Teens, and Suicide Loss” downloadable booklet.

The Center for Grieving Children The Center is based in Portland, Maine. Multiple resources (activities, articles, webinars, support groups, and 1:1 grief support telephone calls) for survivors and those who are supporting them. “What to Tell Children About Suicide” article.

The Dougy Center This website has many resources for grievers of all ages, caregivers, and providers including downloadable toolkits and other materials, podcasts, videos, articles, activities, and training opportunities. “Supporting Children and Teens after a Suicide Death” Downloadable document about supporting children and teens.

National Alliance for Children's Grief “Responding to Change and Loss: In Support of Children, Teens, and Families” downloadable booklet.

