

How Can I Help My Child Through This?



As life can be unpredictable and sudden, the Heartland Community School system has prepared for crisis situations through the organization of a district crisis response team. It consists of teachers, counselors, and administrators from all three schools.

A school crisis is defined as an event which temporarily causes disruption in school routine and is likely to cause emotional turmoil for staff and/or students.

Most people are unprepared for grief, since so often, tragedy strikes suddenly, without warning. It helps to have a close circle of family or friends. It also helps to eat a balanced diet, drink enough non-alcoholic fluids, get exercise and rest.

A grieving person needs:

- to cry
- to be held
- to talk (about feelings)
- to be listened to
- to feel caring around them, to be with people they care about
- to understand how others may react
- to have all questions answered truthfully
- to hear more direct terms such as “died” or “death”, not saying “they are sleeping” or “passed away”.
- to know feelings of grief are normal and there is no right way or wrong way to grieve
- to know the loss should not be minimized. Don't say “He/she had a good life; Don't worry, it will be okay; He/she is not in pain anymore.”

Information for Parents:

- Don't be afraid to talk with your child about the events. Help to filter other information that they may hear, but be honest, open, clear, and accurate.
- Find out what your child thinks and feels. Ask what they heard, how they feel about that, and correct any misperceptions. Let them know that everyone deals with trauma differently.
- Follow your child's lead on what or how much to say. Often times, short conversations when they ask a question are more beneficial than a long talk.
- Don't feel that you have to have all the answers. When you admit that you don't know “why”, they see that you are caring and they feel safer.
- Reassure your child. They may be frightened, but reassure them that they are safe.
- Limit your child's access to media coverage. Seeing it over and over does more harm than good. Talk to them about what they heard or saw.
- Resume normal activities around the home as soon as possible. Routines are healing, comforting, and “normal”.
- Anticipate some “regressive” behaviors. Sleeplessness, irritability, or lack of concentration may be short-term behaviors.
- Your reactions will influence theirs. They are likely to be more sensitive for awhile and will pick up on how willing you are to discuss or deal with the issue.
- Don't let anger be misdirected. Be aware of your feelings and don't let those feelings come between you and your child.
- Don't hesitate to get additional help. If you feel overwhelmed or if problems become persistent, call the school for additional support or direction.

Adapted from from article by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

Stages of Grief:

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has named five stages of grief people go through following a serious loss. Sometimes people get stuck in one of the first four stages. Failing to work through the five stages of grief, is harder on the body and mind than going through them.

When people suggest "looking on the bright side," or other ways of cutting off difficult feelings, the grieving person may feel pressured to hide or deny these emotions. It will take longer for healing to take place.

1. Denial and Isolation

At first, we tend to deny the loss has taken place, and may withdraw from our usual social contacts. This stage may last a few moments, or longer.

2. Anger

The grieving person may then be furious at the person who inflicted the hurt (even if she's dead), or at the world, for letting it happen. He may be angry with himself for letting the event take place, even if, realistically, nothing could have stopped it.

3. Bargaining

Now the grieving person may make bargains with others, asking, "If I do this, will you take away the loss?"

4. Depression

The person feels numb, although anger and sadness may remain underneath.

5. Acceptance

This is when the anger, sadness and mourning have tapered off. The person simply accepts the reality of the loss.

A Child's View of Death

Newborn to Age Two

- may not understand death
- will sense changes in home atmosphere
- may respond with irritability, change in sleep and eating habits.
- will react to emotions of adults
- shows distress if someone who has taken care of them is suddenly gone

Ages Three to Six

- has some understanding of death
- has confusion related to the concept of time
- often connects unrelated events to death
- incorporates "magical thinking" ("I made this happen. Its all my fault".)
- exhibits regressive behaviors
- often views death as punishment
- acts out feelings during play time
- asks about a dead person's return

Ages Six to Nine

- begins to understand that death is final
- can understand more details surrounding a death
- views death in a violent sense
- may feel death is contagious
- looks for natural explanations
- has concern for peers
- denies that the death happened
- fears that other loved ones will die

Ages Nine to Twelve

- starts to understand possibility of their own death
- sees death as final
- feels intense emotions of anger and/or guilt
- displays interest in physical aspects of dying
- may express concerns about the future
- withdraws from others - tries to hide their feelings

Teenagers

- usually able to deal with death at an adult level
- sees death as universal and inevitable
- develops abstract thinking related to death

Questions to generate discussion with your child:

- **How did you first hear about what happened? Where were you?**
- **How did you feel when you heard about it?**
- **What are you feeling now?**
- **Who are other people in your life that you can talk about this with?**
- **How can we help each other at a time like this?**
- **What is your greatest fear right now?**
- **What is the worst thing about this for you?**

Further Assistance:

If you feel that further assistance or information is needed, please look on the school website or contact your school counselor or administrator. He/she can direct you to local, state, or national resources such as psychotherapists (counselors), books, web sites, etc.



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