



# HOW TO HELP GRIEVING STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

## **Don't Shy Away from the Conversation**

Ask about their loved one. Ask for stories or favorite memories. Speaking the loved one's name is a powerful gift.

## **Remind Them: There's No Wrong Way to Grieve**

There's no finish line for when they should be "done" grieving. Even siblings who experience the death of the same person will grieve differently.

## **Be Mindful of Your Words--Language Matters**

Use concrete terms like "dead" and "died," especially with younger children. Avoid phrases like "lost" or "passed on," which can cause confusion. Avoid pacifying phrases such as, "at least they're in a better place now," or "at least you still have..." These phrases feel disconnecting or as though they are somehow grieving incorrectly.

### ***When Referencing a Suicide Death:***

Do not use the phrase, "committed suicide." This phrase can imply sin or crime, compounding the shame or guilt those grieving often place upon themselves.

The preferred phrase is "died by suicide."

## **Remember Grief Can Impact Behaviors & Academic Performance**

Sleeping, eating and regulating emotions are difficult, so grades, extracurricular activities, and social events may feel overwhelming.

## **Check in with Students Around Important Dates**

Major life events (milestone birthdays, graduation, etc.) often trigger new waves of grief. Help students identify their best supports and help create a plan to use them for specific difficult days ahead.

## **Acknowledge New Anxieties**

Many grieving teens carry new anxieties after a death (food, shelter, finances, younger siblings and surviving parents). What other ripple-effect losses has your student experienced? Examples may include changing schools, loss of home, changing guardianship, discontinued traditions, questioning spiritual beliefs and disconnection from extended family.

## **Encourage Healthy Coping Skills**

The more tools students have in their toolbox, the greater resilience they will have through the unexpected waves of grief. Examples: journaling, exercise, expressive arts, music, and mindfulness.

## **Offer Choices Whenever Possible**

The death of an immediate family member creates a great deal of change that students have no control over. Providing opportunities for choice and control, however small, will help ease anxiety.

## **Normalize Contradicting Emotions**

Many griever report feeling guilty when they first laugh or smile after the death, as if the feeling of happiness nullifies their grief or dishonors their loved one. Remind them their feelings are valid and that both joy and sadness can be true.

## **Offer a Listening Ear Over Advice**

If you are unsure of what to say to a grieving student, a helpful statement may be, "I don't know if there is something I can say to ease your hurt, but I am happy to listen and sit with you. Can you tell me more about your loved one?"